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WESTERN
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WESTERN MAGAZINE

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NOVEL
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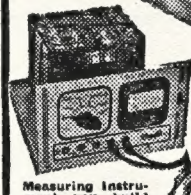
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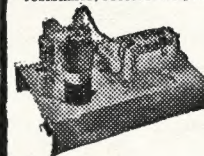
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10¢ DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

FEBRUARY ISSUE PUBLISHED JANUARY 3rd!

VOLUME XLI January, 1945 NUMBER 1

Two Complete Western Novels

"Remember Tascosa!" Walt Coburn 10
—was the rallying cry for the gun-pack that searched a thousand miles for the last living man of the Running W trail-crew . . . For that bloody night in Tascosa must be paid for in the blood of the lost Wesley clan. . .

Wanted—Single-Jack Fighting Men! Tom W. Blackburn 58
When rich Cochise Valley fought futilely against the bonds of a ruthless murder-combine, Bill Nolan, hard-rock engineer, discovered that single-jacks needed sixguns to win freedom for a hundred honest miners!

Smashing Western Novelette

Battle Hymn for the Washoe War Harry F. Olmsted 34
Doug Deverell's strangest manhunt trail led straight to a madman's hidden frontier empire—from which no straight-shooting lawman ever rode out alive!

Three Western Short Stories

I've Got Spurs Frank Bonham 26
Would Will Garrett forget top-money for a pardner-in-need?

Lawman's Gamble Van Cort 47
Two blood-money bounty-hunters take the trail after one wanted man. . .

Tensleep—One-Day Deputy Bart Cassidy 53
That horse-loving Samaritan signed on as badge-toter—with an empty grave as his wages.

—And—

In the Saddle A Department 6
When the call comes for real fighting men. . .

Frontiersmen Who Made History Cedric W. Windas 8
George Ketrick proved up as a top-hand against both Apaches and renegades.

They Called 'Em As They Saw 'Em Howard W. Kegley 33
"Give it a name that fits!" was the idea of those red-shirted Sierra miners.

ALL STORIES NEW



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★ IN THE SADDLE ★

EVERY so often it is our privilege to print a letter from one of our friends in the service. Because of the highly important role the Infantry is playing on every front of this war, we're proud to print here a letter from a man who we admire—an infantry sergeant who, we believe, has a real story to tell:

... "As you know, I'm a re-tread—that is, I saw service in the last War, and at perhaps too early an age, was commissioned, finally being mustered out as a captain in the Air Force.

I got into the same outfit again shortly after Pearl Harbor, which suited me fine, especially since I had my former rank. Then I found myself stuck with my neck under a few tons of paper work in Communications. All right, so I was too antique to fly, but I figured I might just as well have stayed in civilian clothes, back at my old job.

Our C.O. was a great guy, but he didn't see things my way. No, he said, the place for me was right where I was; I could be more valuable, etc. etc.—you probably know the general line. Finally, I got plumb sore, and applied for transfer to a combat unit. Then I got a surprise.

Maybe I could apply for a discharge, then re-enlist; if I got by the physical exams and lived through basic training, I might—by the barest chance—be sent into combat zone. Not actually as a front line G.I., you understand, but I might get some job where it was sort of remote from the excitement.

I grabbed that chance. And I don't have to tell you that my creaking joints were mighty sore before we got through basic, and by that time I knew that I had grown some years older than I was back in '18. Thanks to a pretty active life, I managed to come through OK, but it was tough going, especially at first. However, I found that the old Infantry is more important than I'd ever

dreamed of, and mister, they have guts.

Thank God for General McNair, who insisted that we go through training as closely simulating actual combat as possible. Without experiencing live ammunition, and some mighty active missiles, I think we would have had a much tougher time in Normandy, and from then on. We're in Holland now, and it's no tulip bed, you can bet. There are a lot of things I can't tell you, but I did manage to get a crack at the Krauts—just by the barest luck.

Where our unit was stationed, things got to be pretty tough, what with a barrage of 88's, plus a few waves of Germans who, as you may have read, can fight plenty when they want to.

I figured that my luck hadn't run out, especially when I found an M-1 rifle and shells. I managed to hook up with a few boys I'd known, and moved up with them. There the going was really tough but we managed to maintain our position until some of the others came up. What I got from the C.O. wasn't pretty, but I figure the experience was worth it. And believe me, if I never did before, I'm mighty proud to be a member of this foot-soldier outfit!

... How are the stories coming in, and remember me to some of the writers I may have known. . .

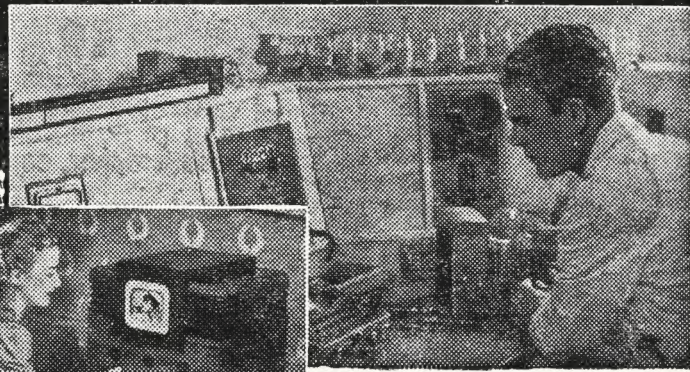
Thanks a lot, Sergeant. And we'll say that the stories are showing up on schedule. We wish you could read the new novel that Walt Coburn sent in, and which will run in the next issue—along in such good company as novelettes by Harry F. Olmsted, Frank Bonham, and other writers who bring to mind that we're fighting for a great country—and a great tradition!

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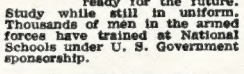
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FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

From the notebook of CEDRIC W. WINDAS

GEORGE KETTRICK



① By the time George Kettrick reached the venerable age of 24, he was already a man of experience. He had been trailboss, trapper, caravan captain and soldier.

In 1869 he owned a horse-ranch in Arizona, but left that well-paying spread long enough to join in the hunt for the troublesome Apache Kid. George exchanged shots with the Kid, and was about the last white man ever to see that redoubtable red warrior.



Kettrick broke wild horses and sold them to the government for remounts during the Indian campaigns of '75. He was paid \$100 per horse... and coined money at it. He also earned the personal thanks of General Miles for distinguished service.

With a dozen comrades, George ambushed the Glieb gang who were stealing government horses and hanged the three Glieb brothers. He kept Uncle Sam's cavalry well mounted during the wild campaign days, and made many other valuable contributions to the taming of the West.





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"REMEMBER TASCOSA!"

To the hidden killers that tracked the Wesley clan from Texas to the Montana badlands and down to Arizona, "Remember Tascosa" was the rallying-cry of the gun-pack. To the last man of that ill-fated running W crew, it was an ever-present threat which warned him to step soft, go heeled—and prepare for a sudden gunsmoke grave!

They were firing rifles from the brush as the runaway careened down the road. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Gathering of the Gun-Clan

SOME TIME between nightfall and day-break, Wesley Hyatt judged, the rustlers had cut the big horse pasture fence and had run off about fifty head of Cross H geldings. The tracks were there,

Hard-Hitting Novel of
Arizona Cowmen

By
WALT COBURN



stamped deep in the drying mud, because there had been a brief but heavy rain during the night.

Hyatt, owner of the big Cross H outfit, cut their sign after the horse wrangler had fetched in the remuda with nearly fifty head of horses short from the big pasture. He gave

Hyatt the disturbing news that the fence was down at the far end, all five wires cut and three panels gone at the corner. The loose wires had been wrapped around the posts to keep from cutting the horses.

It was right after the finish of the round-up, and Wes Hyatt, owner of the big Cross H, had paid off his cowhands and let them ride to town for a spree. He was alone at the ranch with the cook and the young Mexican horse wrangler. So it looked like the rustlers had watched and caught Hyatt when he was short-handed.

About half the stolen horses were shod, and nary a boot track was there at the cut fence, so there was no telling how many horse thieves had done the job.

But it didn't make good sense. This was Arizona and the only market for stolen horses was across the Border in Mexico. Unless there was a revolution brewing, and rebels buying horses, Sonora and Chihuahua were barren markets for stolen horses, especially when they wore a well-known brand like the Cross H. There was no sign of a revolution, so Mexico was out.

That left Utah to the North and New Mexico on the West. In either case there was a mighty big strip of Arizona to cross. The horse thieves must have lots of guts or lame brains to tackle that. Wes Hyatt scratched his wiry gray-black hair and yanked his hat down at a stubborn slant. His right hand rested on the stock of his saddle carbine.

There was just one guess left, he figured, and he'd play it for what it was worth. It tied in with everything that had gone before. The threatening notes that had come in the mail; the printed notices he had found tacked to the gate posts, warning him to sell out or give his outfit away and ride off from it and never come back. And heading each mailed letter or posted notice were the words, "Remember Tascosa!"

And there it was right now, a ragged chunk of brown wrapping paper, tacked to the corner post of his big horse pasture. Boldly printed on it were those two words: "REMEMBER TASCOSA!"

As if the big cowman who now called himself Wesley Hyatt could ever forget the toughest little trail-town in the Southwest!

Old Man Wesley, his four growing sons, and four cowpunchers, plus a cook and horse wrangler, had left Texas for Cheyenne with three thousand head of cattle in the Wesley Running W brand. At Tascosa, on the old Potter and Bacon Cattle Trail, the four cowhands had thrown in with a tough rustler gang. They had made a try at stampeding the herd and killing off the Old Man and his four sons.

They had run into a bad snag, however,

when a Tascosa saloonkeeper tipped off Old Man Wesley. That old Texan had given his four sons their fighting orders, and Hyatt and his three brothers had carried them out. When the gunsmoke cleared, Old Man Wesley was mortally wounded and all four of his boys had bullet nicks in their Texan hides.

THEY had gathered around their dying father and listened to his dying words. The Old Man told them to take the herd on after they'd buried him there at Tascosa. To sell the cattle at Cheyenne and divide the money equally. Then they were to change their names and split up. Each son should use his given name for a last name. Until time had covered their separate trails, their safest bet was to locate far apart.

"Because them wasn't just run-of-the-mill cattle thieves that tried to wipe us out," Old Man Wesley had told the boys. "Them was renegade guerillas that was too damned ornery and cold-blooded even for Quantrell's tough outfit. They're the ragtag scum of the Union and Confederate armies. Carpetbaggers, Jayhawkers, bushwhackers—call 'em the lowest names in the book and you're praisin' 'em! They're prowlin' like wolves along the cattle trails now. And they hate my guts because I sided with Quantrell when he had 'em horse-whipped and run outa camp.

"Me'n you boys got mebbys a couple or three of them but mostly we got only their hired tough hands. There's a few more big 'uns and they got away. And as long as they're alive they'll be after the sons of Jim Wesley, till they've wiped out the Wesley name. . . . So I'd ruther my sons dropped the Wesley name and stayed alive, than to be buried with that name on their headboards."

Hyatt, Jett, Blair and Tracy Wesley carried out those dying orders. Only Hyatt, the youngest son, had kept Wesley for a front name. And as Bill Jett, Tom Blair, and Hugh Tracy the others had each taken a different trail. Jett had located in Wyoming. Blair had come back as far as New Mexico. Tracy had gone on to Montana. Hyatt had come to Arizona.

For the first few years they had kept in touch with one another. Mainly through letters they wrote to their younger brother Hyatt. But once separated, they had drifted farther apart.

Oddly enough, Hyatt was the only one of the Wesley brothers who had never married, and the only one of them not to take back the Wesley name for a last name. The passing of a few years had lulled the other three brothers into a feeling of false security. And each had named his first born after himself. It was only by roundabout ways that Wesley Hyatt got news of his three brothers.

The last news of them had been tragic. Jett had located at Brown's Hole, thrown in with outlaws, and had been killed in a gun-fight.

Blair, a sheriff in New Mexico, had been shot and killed by cattle rustlers from the Texas Tascosa country.

Tracy, ranching in Montana, had been mysteriously bushwhacked.

These three separate news clippings had reached Hyatt within the past six months by mail. And each wore the heavy black heading "Remember Tascosa!"

There had been a brief note from somewhere in New Mexico, signed Blair Wesley. Telling Hyatt that the signer of the letter was now wearing his murdered father's law badge and packing his dad's gun. He was trailing down and killing his father's murderers.

Another letter had come from Wyoming, written by young Jett. It said that his father, Jett Wesley, had been dry-gulched by renegades and he was following their trail towards New Mexico. And for Hyatt to look for him one of these days when he showed up.

But it was the letter from Montana that worried Hyatt most. Because its handwriting was round and even and it was written on good note paper and the tone of it was soft. Reading between the lines, Hyatt figured that Tracy Wesley had sired a weakling son to wear his fighting name.

But Hyatt had written each of them to come here to his Cross H ranch in Arizona as quick as they could make it.

He wanted to see them, size them up, and make his last will and testament accordingly. Jett had died a sort of renegade outlaw and broke. Blair had left his son only a blood-spattered law badge and a slow six-shooter. And Tracy's Montana outfit had been just about wiped out by the hard winter. . . .

Now Hyatt was sitting here in the broad middle of one of the biggest cattle spreads in Arizona. If those three heirs to the Cross H outfit expected to share it, they'd better rally round their Uncle Hyatt and fight for what they'd have coming when Hyatt Wesley crossed the Big Divide.

But they hadn't showed up. And Hyatt was short-handed this morning, when it looked like the Tascosa renegades had set a bushwhacker gun-trap for him, baiting it with stolen Cross H saddle horses. . . .

THE muddy trail took him across a wide strip of mesquite-spotted desert, and on over onto the rough range now owned by a stranger named Dee Jimerson.

Jimerson had bought up the land, brands and remnant cattle in those half dozen irons. And because those little outfits had been greasy-sack spreads that dragged hungry

loops and ate too much Cross H beef, Hyatt had welcomed this newcomer.

Dee Jimerson had ridden over to the Cross H ranch after he had bought out the little outfits.

He had introduced himself, swung from his saddle and shoved out his hand. "I bought up them half dozen greasy-sack outfits that's bin whittlin' on your Cross H cattle. I hope we kin git along, Hyatt."

Hyatt had sized the man up. A tall, lean, blond man in his early thirties. His calloused hand gripped Hyatt's like a steel clamp and he'd met the older cowman's scrutiny without flinching.

That had been six months ago. And the two outfits had worked together without hitch or argument. Jimerson was getting a clean work on his rough country, gathering the remnants he'd bought. Stocking the range with cattle in his Currycomb brand.

Jimerson had a ramrod Hyatt did not like or trust. A long-gearred cowpuncher with coarse, iron gray hair and a pair of hard black eyes and a swarthy, pockmarked skin. Dee Jimerson called him Uncle Floyd. Floyd Mallett was his name. But he was one of the best all-around cowmen Hyatt had ever seen work.

Floyd Mallett ran one outfit and a short, hawk-beaked man called Stumpy ran the other outfit, and between them they were getting the rough mountain range worked cleaner than Hyatt had ever thought possible.

Stumpy, somewhere in his fifties, was ornery and Jimerson's hired Mexicans worked better for Floyd Mallett than they did for the waspish Stumpy. But neither of Jimerson's ramrods had as yet bothered Hyatt.

Hyatt followed the muddy trail of his stolen horses into the broken and brush-choked country of Jimerson's range. If there was a bushwhacker trap set it would be somewhere near here. He slid his saddle gun from its scabbard.

As if that were a signal, a carbine cracked from a clump of manzanita. The bullet cut the crown of Hyatt's hat. He threw himself sideways out of the saddle and landed crouched in the brush. Bullets whined and clipped around him.

He heard Uncle Floyd Mallett's flat voice: "What the hell you a-tryin' to do? Spoil a man's aim? I got a good mind to—" It broke off abruptly at the sound of a gun crack. Mallett screamed once harshly, and then was still.

"You double-crossin' son of a snake!" shrilled Stumpy. "You damned Dee—"

Again the sharp, clean crack of that same .30-30 ended Stumpy's shrill nasal whine in the death-rattle.

Hyatt crouched there behind the thick manzanita brush, gripping his cocked saddle gun. Sweat beaded his leathery face. Then he

heard Dee Jimerson calling his name loudly. "Trail's clean now, Hyatt."

Hyatt saw Dee Jimerson ride boldly out into plain sight from behind brush and rocks. He had a .30-30 saddle gun in the crook of his left arm. He shoved the carbine into its scabbard and pulled a sack of tobacco and cigarette papers from his brush jacket pocket. A faint, slow grin spread his wide mouth.

"Looks like I got here just in time, Hyatt." Dee Jimerson's voice was cold and his blue eyes were bleak. The cupped hands holding the match were not shaking.

"Throws me short-handed two damned good ramrods," he added.

Hyatt stood erect and walked out from behind the manzanita thicket. His narrowed gray eyes studied Jimerson. His gun was ready to use.

"I don't git it, Jimerson."

"That was Uncle Floyd and Stumpy, playin' games. Mebbysy they wasn't playin' for keeps, but I was. I killed 'em both for you, Hyatt."

"It don't make sense." Hyatt shook his grizzled head.

"The round-up finished work, day before yesterday," said Dee Jimerson, "I paid off my Mexicans, let Uncle Floyd and Stumpy go to town for a drunk. Thought I'd ride over to the Cross H to see you about nothin' in particular. . . .

"Back yonder a few miles I rode up on a bunch of your saddle horses. Looked like they'd bin hazed hard durin' the night. From then on I rode with a gun in my hand. And I came upon Uncle Floyd and Stumpy just about the time it looked like they'd shot you loose from your saddle. But you're right. It don't make good sense."

Bewilderment milled in Hyatt's brain as Dee Jimerson hooked a long leg around his saddle horn and the smoke drifted from his nostrils. Cold blooded and mighty quick triggered. Cool now as beer on ice. . . .

"Was Floyd Mallett your uncle?" Hyatt asked, for lack of anything else to say.

"I always called him Uncle Floyd. . . Them two of your cowpunchers a-comin' yonder, like they was in a rush to get somewheres?"

Hyatt swung into his saddle again. Still gripping his carbine, he eyed the two men riding hard from the direction of the Cross H ranch. He shook his head.

"Strangers to me." And he reined his horse so that his back was not towards Dee Jimerson. But he was between Jimerson and the two riders as they came on and he shoved his carbine into its saddle scabbard and slid his six-shooter out of its holster.

THEY had their hands on their guns when they reined up. Both were young, somewhere in their early twenties. One had wiry

black hair and gray eyes and a lean, serious looking face. The other rider was rusty-haired and freckled and there was a sharp twinkle in his green eyes. He had a gay recklessness about him.

Hyatt let out a long, slow breath. These boys were the spitting images of their fathers, and needed no introduction.

"We're lookin'," said the black-haired young cowhand, "for Wesley Hyatt."

"There was a little shootin'," grinned the red-haired young cowpuncher. "Mebbyso there'll be some more. And we'll join into it. Talk fast, gents."

"You're Blair," Hyatt nodded at the black-haired youth. "And the sorrel maned 'un will be Jett. I'm your Uncle Hyatt. You kin let go your guns, boys, and tuck in your shirt tails."

"Then who," asked the grim-lipped Blair, motioning at Dee Jimerson, "is he?"

"He's Dee Jimerson," said Hyatt, cutting a quick look at the big tow-headed coman. "Owns the Currycomb. Bought up the little outfits around me. The shootin' you heard was Dee Jimerson killin' off his two ramrods. Seems like they was aimin' to drygulch me. Jimerson just rode up on 'em and taken my part."

Hyatt was watching Blair and Jett and they were eying Jimerson. Jimerson's dead cigarette hung from a mouth-corner and his weight was in his left stirrup as if he was ready to jerk his gun and either ride it out, or drop into the brush and fight from its shelter.

Hyatt sensed the danger and rode in between Jimerson and his two nephews "Take 'er easy boys," Hyatt's voice was a slow, deliberate drawl. "The shootin's over. . . . What'll we do with Uncle Floyd and Stumpy, Jimerson?"

"I'll send somebody out after their carcasses, Hyatt, and I'll take their saddled horses back to the ranch. I reckon you'll want to pick up them stolen horses. Looks like you got yourself a pair of tough hands now to keep you company. So long for now, then."

Dee Jimerson reined his horse and rode away, his back a target if they chose to use it. He had not even given the dead Uncle Floyd and Stumpy a passing glance.

"The way Dee Jimerson told it," said Blair, his hard eyes watching the man out of sight, "ain't exactly the way me'n Jett saw it happen."

"There was three of 'em," grinned Jett, "bushed up together. And you rode into it. And from where we was watchin' it looked like the bushwhacker trap blowed up of its own accord."

Blair rode over to the rocks and brush and swung from his horse. Hyatt and Jett fol-

lowed him. Blair looked up from Uncle Floyd Mallett's dead body.

"Shot in the back the first time," he said flatly. "Second bullet hit 'im in the belly. . . . The little 'un shot twice through the belly and brisket. That Dee Jimerson shore plays for keeps!"

Hyatt shook hands with his nephews. Blair's slow grin softened the hard lines of his lean face, and Jett's freckled grin was as warming as sunlight.

CHAPTER TWO

War-Clouds

AFTER they'd dropped the stolen horses back in the big pasture and had patched the broken fence, the stars had come out, and then they reached the adobe buildings and mesquite corrals at the Cross H home ranch. They were putting up their horses when Hyatt noticed the Currycomb gelding and another horse with a blotched brand in adjoining stalls. Both horses were sweat-marked but they had been unsaddled, watered and fed.

A woman's soft, rather husky voice from the doorway of the big adobe barn swung Hyatt around. Blair and Jett turned from unsaddling their horses. All three stared at the tall young woman standing there in the lantern light.

"One of you," she was saying, "had better saddle a fresh horse and ride to town for the doctor."

"Doctor?" Hyatt tugged at his hat brim. "What for, ma'am?"

"Rattlesnake bite. Though I've done all the things I've ever heard you should do for snake bite."

"You snake-bit, lady? Good gosh!"

The tall, tawny-haired woman smiled faintly. Dressed in faded overalls and denim brush jacket and cowpuncher boots, she was slender and lithe. But her tawny hair was sprinkled with gray, and there were tiny lines etched around the corners of her dark gray-green eyes.

"Not me, mister. And there are some who would gladly tell you that the rattlesnake that bit Dee Jimerson's sister would just crawl off and die. It's your niece, Tracy Wesley, that's snake-bitten. I take it you're Wesley Hyatt, or Hyatt Wesley?"

"I found the girl at Hackberry Springs where she'd stepped off her horse to get a drink. I heard her let out a yip, and I rode there, got her boot off, did a little jackknife surgery. She's a game little kid, but I'd advise you getting the doc. I'll stay till he gets here. She needs another woman. Even if it's a hard-case sister like Anita Jimerson."

She turned and went back to the main house, her silver-mounted spurs jingling. And it was

then that Hyatt noticed for the first time the ivory handled six-shooter in an open holster looped in a filled cartridge belt that slanted across her slim hips.

Her right hand brushed the ivory butt as she walked. Hyatt knew she was an expert horsewoman without ever seeing her in the saddle. Yet there was nothing mannish about Anita Jimerson. Her smile, her eyes, were those of a woman, albeit a woman who had been kicked around by life. And had fought back.

Hyatt looked at his two nephews. "So Tracy Hyatt is a girl!"

"News to me," grinned Jett. "I'd heard there was a young Tracy Hyatt. Figured Cousin Tracy was a boy. Match you to see who goes to town for the vet, Sheriff?"

"You'd cheat, Outlaw. So I might as well borrow a fresh horse from Uncle Hyatt and hit the trail."

There was an easy comradeship between the two cousins that pleased Hyatt. More from the hoorawing banter they swapped than from any direct questioning, Hyatt learned how Jett had drifted down the outlaw trail in tough company.

They had swung easterly from Mosquero, New Mexico, following the Canadian River to the tough little trail-town of Tascosa, Texas. They had shot up the town, ridden into every saloon and out again, yipping and shooting. And if there was any Law in Tascosa, it had taken to cover.

THERE had been, however, one man at Tascosa who had not dodged and ducked the wild shooting. He stood alone at the end of the bar in one of the saloons, a drink in his hand, almost indifferent to the hell-raising. His brooding aloofness bothered the tipsy, red-headed Jett.

"Mebbyso you're deaf, mister? Or not all there in the head?" Jett had eyed him.

"Mebby," came the quiet reply.

"We're smokin' the hydrophobia skunks outa their Tascosa holes." Jett's hand had dropped to his gun. "You wouldn't be one of 'em that says 'Remember Tascosa'?"

"No. I'm a stranger here. Had you gents figured for local talent. Fact is, I'm cuttin' sign for a bushwhacker outfit that writes notes sayin' the same two words. What's your outfit?"

"Just cowboys in town, but I ain't hidin' my name. I'm Jett Wesley. Who are you?"

A grin spread slowly across the other cowpuncher's lean tanned face.

"I'm Sheriff Blair Wesley, from around Tularosa, New Mexico. I reckon that makes us cousins."

So they met—two tough youngsters, yet as unlike as thunder storm and sunshine. They had compared notes. And when Jett's

outlaw companions had drifted yonderly, Blair and Jett had ridden together to locate their Uncle Hyatt in Arizona. Fetching what little information they'd picked up at Tascosa.

"It ain't much, Uncle Hyatt," Blair told him. "They call themselves the Tascosa Pool. But the only man at Tascosa who would talk much was so doggoned old his memory was faded out, and he either couldn't remember or he was scared to talk.

"He was runnin' a saloon when Old Man Wesley and his four sons fetched the Running W trail herd north. He showed us the Old Man's grave. Said he was the gent who had tipped off Old Man Wesley, and the Tascosa Pool had worked him over till he was left crippled for life. Said he hadn't any name. Tascosa called him the Rebel, but it was 'Old Reb' now.

"He still had his saloon; still drank a quart of corn whiskey every day. The Tascosa Pool let him alone. Old Reb is tough as a boot. I don't think he told me'n Jett all he knew. And when we asked him the names of the men in the Tascosa Pool, he just looked at us faded-eyed and shook his head. Only his head don't move an inch on his neck. When he shakes his head he has to move his shoulders. Said they broke his neck when they hung 'im that time for tippin' off Old Man Wesley. Claimed he was the only man ever to have his neck broke by a lynch-rope and live to tell it. . . ."

Hyatt told the two boys to come on to the house. It was a long ride to town and whichever one of them was going to make the ride had better grab a cup of coffee and a bait of grub before he pulled out. Blair and Jett agreed readily enough. They were curious for a look at their cousin Tracy, who had turned out to be a girl.

They found her in bed in the spare room that had never been used—the only bed in the rambling adobe house that boasted white sheets and pillowcases. Tracy sat propped against the big white pillows, her face a little white under its healthy coating of tan. Her hair was thick and black with coppery highlights and hung in two heavy braids. White teeth showed in a quick smile, more like the grin of a small boy.

Anita Jimerson stood alongside the big four-poster bed. She moved away as Hyatt, his two nephews behind him, came in, their hats in their hands.

"A heck of a way to land here, Uncle Hyatt!" Tracy Wesley's voice was a little unsteady but there was laughter in it. "And only for Anita, I'd never have made it alive. Gosh, she's an angel!"

Hyatt took Tracy's small tanned hand and held it. Looking down at his niece with a slow, incredulous grin.

"My brother Tracy was the homeliest

damned kid on earth," he chuckled. "You shore musta took after your mammy."

Then he called Blair and Jett over. Blair shook hands awkwardly and dropped Tracy's hand like he was anxious to let go.

JETT grinned and then bent down and kissed Tracy and when he straightened up he was holding one of her heavy plaited braids in his hand. Tracy's face had flushed. Jett's grin teased her.

"Just usin' up a cousin's rights. Anyhow, that's better'n a poke in the nose. And that's what I'd promised myself I was goin' to hand Cousin Tracy from Montana. I'd heard how you run the ranch up there. How you never got drunk and raised hell like a cow-country kid should. Your dad wrote mine how his Tracy was running his outfit when he got both legs busted in a runaway. How his kid Tracy never drank or didn't even smoke. Wow, did I hate that young Tracy's guts!"

"I told Blair on our way over, I said, I hope that psalm-singin' pure-minded Tracy is at the Cross H, because I'm goin' to set on him and pour a quart of likker down him and make him chaw tobacco. I'll make a man outa that jelly bean or kill 'im, a-tryin'! And then you turn out to be like this! Holy cow!"

And Jett tugged gently at the heavy braid, and kissed her again.

"Snake-bit!" Jett suddenly remembered. He turned on Blair. "Rattle your hocks, Sheriff. Fetch the vet. And all the candy they got in town. Don't stand there like a big ol' country boy! Shake your dewclaws!"

"Would it make you feel any better, Tracy," Blair grinned faintly, "if I was to take this sorrel-maned thing out and throw him away?"

When Tracy laughed, little lights danced in her smoke-colored eyes. She shook her head. "I don't need a doctor. Anita's done everything a doctor could. If I'm poisoned, I'd be dead before he got here, anyhow. But I'm not ready to die. But I won't forget, Blair. And if that specked red-headed rooster crows too loud, I'll take you up on the deal. . . . Anita says she has to pull out. Don't let her go, Uncle Hyatt."

"It ain't safe after dark," Hyatt turned to Anita Jimerson. "Anyhow, Tracy's right about the doc. Blair, drag Jett out to the cook cabin and tell the Chinaman to rustle us some grub, while I take a look at that snake bite."

When the two boys had gone, Hyatt examined the girl's leg, carefully removing the bandage. He'd had experience, he said, with rattlesnake bites; had a scar on his leg to prove it. And when he and Anita had bathed and bandaged the swollen, discolored leg, the grizzled cowman looked into Anita Jimerson's gray-green eyes.

"We've gotten mighty deep in debt to you, ma'am. You saved this young 'un's life." He held out his hand.

Anita Jimerson did not seem to notice the proffered hand. There was a faintly bitter twist to her smile.

"I didn't know who she was at the time. Perhaps if I'd known she was a Wesley, I'd have minded my own business and ridden on."

"You shore got it in for yourself, lady."

"It's the Wesley tribe I've got the grudge against. And I'd better get out from under your Wesley roof before it caves in on a Jimerson."

She would have left the room but Hyatt stood in the doorway. A puzzled look in his hard gray eyes. "You're a few jumps ahead of me, ma'am. Talkin' in riddles. A few hours ago Dee Jimerson saved me from a bushwhacker trap. He had to kill Uncle Floyd Mallett and Stumpy to save my hide. You just saved Tracy's life. That's no way to pay off a grudge. You sick, lady?"

The color had drained from Anita Jimerson's tanned face. She gripped one of the bedposts so hard her knuckles showed bone-white.

"Dee Jimerson killed Uncle Floyd and Stumpy?" Her voice was husky.

"Floyd and Stumpy run off a bunch of Cross H horses last night, leavin' a muddy trail for me to foller. I rode into their trap. Like as not they'd have killed me if Dee Jimerson hadn't broke it up with some mighty quick shootin'."

Anita Jimerson's eyes were as cold green as deep winter ice as she hitched up the sagging cartridge belt around her slim waist. "Dee Jimerson," she said in her husky voice, "double-crossed his own kind. They'll hang him for that!"

Anita Jimerson took tobacco and papers from the pocket of her clean gray flannel shirt. She rolled a slim cigarette and her eyes glinted green through the tobacco smoke.

"Who'll hang him?" asked Hyatt quietly.

"The Tascosa Pool." Her words came softly through the smoke.

She took a step towards the door. Now there was a gun in her hand and it was pointed straight at Hyatt's lean belly.

"It's time I got here," she said, "and ram-rodged my own outfit, before Dee softens up and makes a fool of himself all the way down the line. I hold no kind of pity for Uncle Floyd. He was a bushwhacker. And Stumpy was a cold-blooded little snake. But that won't excuse Dee. He'll hang for what he did. And don't make the mistake of thank-

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ing Dee Jimerson for saving your life. He hates your Wesley guts, mister. So do I. And for the same reasons. And if Dee hasn't declared war on your outfit, it's because he's playing his cards close to his belt.

"But it won't be a bushwhacker war, mister, because the Jimersons fight out in the open. We ask no odds and we'll give you none. Better get the little Tracy kid out of here. Send her away. We don't fight women or kids. Blair and the red-headed Jett are old enough to take chips in the game if they want to sit in. They're your kin. It's up to you to give 'em their orders. You sent for 'em. They're here. Let 'em play their tough hands out. Now I'm going. If you crowd me, I'll shoot my way out."

CHAPTER THREE

Bushwhack Welcome!

THERE was a moment of strained, shocked silence until Tracy called from the bed: "Anita! I don't know what it's all about, but I can't let you go like this. Gosh, you saved my life. . . ."

"Forget it, youngster. I didn't know when I found you that you belonged to the Wesley tribe, or I'd have let you die."

"Don't believe her, Uncle Hyatt. If you could have seen her! How she worked getting my boot off. Slashing a criss-cross at the bite, and then she sucked out the poison and spat it out and went at it again. And then she carried me in her arms most of the way here, mothering me and talking to me and telling me how I'd be all right."

"She undressed me and bathed me and put me to bed like I was a baby, and she had that poor Chinaman hopping, fetching bandages and medicines, and all. And all the time she knew who I was, so don't let her fool you. Gosh, Uncle Hyatt, she's so beautiful! So gentle and kind, and she cried. . . ."

Anita Jimerson's face reddened. And Hyatt, standing spread legged in the doorway, thumbs hooked in his cartridge belt, grinned slowly at her.

"Tracy's right, Anita. You're all she says you are. Mighty beautiful and kind. But I don't reckon you ever give yourself much of a chance along them lines. You don't need that gun here—now or ever."

"If you figger you've got to ride on to the Currycomb, I'll ride along with you till you meet your brother, but there's no call to rush off without supper. And if there's goin' to be a range war, we better find out why we're shootin' at one another."

"Dee and I got along all right. And up till the time Floyd Mallett and Stumpy laid their gun trap, there's bin no trouble—"

"You Wesleys have short memories. Remember Tascosa?"

Hyatt scowled at her, still grinning. "What's Tascosa got to do with you, Anita?"

"The Wesleys killed my father there at Tascosa. My mother was killed by a stray bullet. I was a kid then, with a baby brother to look after. I saw those drunken Wesleys drag father out of his saloon. They put a rope around my father's neck and threw the rope over that ridge log and yanked him into the air. Hanged him. . . ."

"I was just a kid. I grabbed a butcher knife and ran across the street and cut the rope. That night Uncle Floyd took me and my baby brother, Dee, in a buckboard to his ranch on the Canadian River. His wife, Aunt Mattie, raised us. We moved from the Canadian, to Utah, then to Colorado. We kept moving because the Wesleys were on his trail, Uncle Floyd told us. And it's always been like that."

"Uncle Floyd and Stumpy were like wolves on the dodge. Dragging Aunt Mattie and us kids along till I got old enough to make a hand. When we got old enough to understand they told Dee and me how Old Man Wesley had stolen their cattle, killed my older brothers and hung my father because Old Man Wesley had been a guerilla with Quantrell and he'd raised his sons to kill and steal. And the way to fight fire was with a backfire. When the sign was right, the Tascosa Pool would organize and wipe out the Wesleys where they found 'em."

Anita Jimerson's eyes were looking straight at Hyatt.

"So they sent Dee here," she continued after a moment, "to locate near your Cross H outfit. Uncle Floyd and Stumpy followed to help him. The others will be showing up any time. They had had their work cut out, and they'd got their jobs done."

"Such as killin' off my three brothers," nodded Hyatt grimly. "Tracy, Blair and Jett Wesley. Fathers of this girl and my two nephews here. That's what you mean, isn't it, ma'am?"

"That's the size of it. They took Dee along but they did the killing because Dee balked at bushwhacking. Dee Jimerson won't shoot a man from the brush. I'd drilled that into him since he was big enough to hold a gun. Uncle Floyd used to beat us both but it didn't do any good. When we ran off, he'd fetch us back."

Hyatt scowled, puzzled. "Dee Jimerson bought out them little outfits. Uncle Floyd Mallett and Stumpy worked for him as ramrods."

Anita Jimerson shook her tawny head. "The Tascosa Pool owns the land, the Currycomb brand, and all the cattle and horses in that iron. Floyd Mallett and Stumpy belonged to the Tascosa Pool. So does Dee Jimerson."

And so do I—the only she-wolf in the pack.

"I've cooked for that crew of men, wrangled horses, night-hawked, rode point and swing and slapped along the drags of their trail herds. In a tight I'd handle a gun. There were times when I've had to fight like a wildcat and Dee has had to shoot one or two men who got rough with me. And I grew to hate Uncle Floyd worse than he'd ever taught me and Dee to hate the Wesleys. And I hated Stumpy. . . . But the Tascosa Pool will hang Dee Jimerson for killing Floyd Mallett and Stumpy. The Tascosa Pool kills its traitors."

Hyatt grinned slowly. "You and me kin save Dee Jimerson from hangin'."

"How?"

"I reckon Dee Jimerson had that figured out when he killed Floyd Mallett and Stumpy. Only Blair and Jett ridin' up on us like they did, kinda throwed a monkey wrench into his plans. Dee Jimerson was scared of Uncle Floyd and Stumpy, so he killed 'em before they could kill him. And he'll tell them other Tascosa Pool gents that Hyatt Wesley killed Floyd Mallett and Stumpy."

"Now you kin back up your brother Dee's word. Just to help pay off the Wesley debt, I'll be proud to declare I wiped out that pair of bushwhackers. And I'll tell Blair and Jett to back me up on that declaration. What's more, if you'll wait a minute, I'll put it down in writin'. And you kin take it along and hand it over to them Tascosa Pool gents."

ANITA JIMERSON'S eyes hardened with suspicion. "You don't look tricky. But that don't make sense."

"Neither did it make sense to me when Dee Jimerson killed his Uncle Floyd and Stumpy. But you've part way cleared it up. I got a notion Dee Jimerson is pullin' out of the Tascosa Pool."

"Why?"

"Because mebbysso he's got suspicious. You ever bin back to Tascosa since the night you seen 'em hang your daddy?"

"No. Neither has Dee."

"What was your father's name?"

"Jim Jimerson. But he was called Rebel—Reb Jimerson."

Hyatt smiled. "So you didn't know, ma'am? He's called Old Reb now. Claims he's the only man livin' with a neck that was broken by a lynchin' rope. And when this ruckus is over I'll ride to Tascosa with you and your brother Dee to hear Rebel Jimerson tell you that the Tascosa Pool renegades hung him—because he was a friend to Old Man Wesley!"

"Now it looks like Floyd Mallett kidnaped Rebel Jimerson's two kids so he could raise 'em up to be outlaws. They let Old Reb stay alive so that they kin break his tough old heart before he dies. That's what that Tascosa

Pool is doin' to you and your brother Dee.

"Rebel Jimerson," Hyatt went on, "was Old Man Wesley's silent pardner back in Texas. He came up to Tascosa a few months ahead of the Running W herd, alone, and started his saloon. He had a half interest in that trail herd. When the Tascosa Pool propositioned Reb about helpin' steal the Wesley share of the cattle, Rebel pretended to agree. But the night the ruckus started, he was fightin' back to back with me and my brothers when our Old Man got killed. . . . And he tended Old Man Wesley's grave in the Tascosa boothill."

"They told me'n my brothers that the Tascosa Pool outfit had hung Rebel Jimerson. And killed his wife and two younger kids."

Anita Jimerson nodded. There was a strange look in her eyes.

"We thought the whole Jimerson tribe was killed," said Hyatt, "or I'd have sent half the cattle money back to Rebel Jimerson. Half of all I've got here is yours and Dee's, by rights. When he said his name was Dee Jimerson I wondered if he'd be kin to the Jimersons that had bin killed. But Dee never mentioned it, and I kept waitin' for him to say somethin'. . . . This is the first time I ever told this much of the story to anybody. Young Blair and Jett never heard it, I know. How about you, Tracy?"

Tracy shook her head, wide-eyed. Hyatt grinned slowly at Anita Jimerson. "That's about all of it, Anita. Rebel Jimerson would tell you the same story if he was here. Till Blair and Jett told me about talkin' to a man called Old Reb at Tascosa, I thought he was dead. I'd like to have you take my word for it."

Anita Jimerson had long ago shoved her ivory-handled six-shooter into its holster. Now she walked over to where Hyatt stood and held out her hand and he took it and held onto it because it felt cold and unsteady.

"You don't know how glad I am to believe you, Hyatt. . . . This changes everything, doesn't it? Puts Dee and me on your side. But I've got to get to Dee now. As fast as I can make it. Before they get to the Currycomb ranch, before they hang him. They're on their way there now. I was to meet 'em there tonight. They'll kill Dee because they hate him. Like they hate me. Because we're Rebel Jimerson's son and daughter. I've got to get there!"

Hyatt shook his head. "Blair and Jett are rearin' to get into a ruckus. And I've already waited too long. You ride herd on Tracy till we git back. We'll fetch Dee with us. It's about time you swapped that gun for some knittin'. How many in this Tascosa Pool? Who are they and what do they look like?"

From outside came the sharp explosion

of a gun. Then the brittle sound of shattered glass as the bullet smashed the window, drilling a hole in the windowshade.

Hyatt, talking to Anita Jimerson, his eyes on her, saw her stiffen with a jerk, a startled look in her eyes. Then she collapsed in a heap.

Hyatt jerked his gun and called to Tracy in a harsh whisper. "Blow out that light!"

The darkened room was filled with the ear-splitting roar of Hyatt's six-shooter as he shot at the window with its pulled blind. Then he flattened himself beside the window and risked lifting a lower corner of the blind.

Slanting his gunbarrel downward into the darkness, he pulled the trigger, shooting to scare off whoever had fired the murderous shot from out yonder. And he shouted, "Blair! Jett! Watch out! Bushwhackers!"

He saw the light in the cook cabin go out. Heard Jett shout, "Take 'er easy, Sheriff!"

Then Blair's voice, flat-toned and dangerous: "Keep your shirt on, Outlaw!"

There came the heavy blast of a double-barreled shotgun from over at the cook cabin and the Chinaman's staccato voice cussing in pidgin English.

HYATT grinned faintly in the darkness. The Chinaman, given the slightest excuse, loved to fire off that old sawed-off shotgun. Hyatt had given him orders that if he heard shooting during the night he was to put out his light if he had one burning, and let go with both barrels and yell like hell.

"You boys out yonder," Hyatt called to Blair and Jett, "Lay low and stay together. Shoot anybody you see on the prowl, afoot or horseback."

"What's the rip, Hyatt?" shouted Jett.

"Somebody shot through the window!"

"The hell! You go that way, Blair, around the house. I'll go—"

"Stick together!" shouted Hyatt, ejecting empty shells from his gun and re-loading.

"Anita's alive, Uncle Hyatt." Tracy's voice was low but unafraid. "I've put her on the bed. Better make a light as soon as it's safe. She's bleeding a lot."

Hyatt groped around and found a blanket which he hung across the window. He struck a match and wrapped a glove around the hot lamp chimney to lift it, then adjusted the lamp wick.

Tracy stood across the bed from him. She was wearing one of his nightshirts that hung on her like a large white sack. With her hair hanging below her waist in two heavy braids, Tracy looked more like fourteen than eighteen. She was small, too. Yet she had lifted the limp Anita from the floor and laid her out on the bed. That had taken strength and cool thinking.

"And snake-bit, to boot!" Hyatt voiced

his thoughts. Then gave his attention to Anita.

Anita Jimerson's tawny dark yellow hair was sodden with blood that flowed sluggishly from a bullet rip along the back of her scalp.

Hyatt's fingers were skillful as a surgeon's as he felt the wound. Anita Jimerson had escaped death by the barest fraction of an inch. But it could still prove fatal. Head wounds are dangerous and tricky.

Hyatt kept a well-equipped medicine and surgical kit here at the ranch. There was seldom a month passed that some cowpuncher did not need patching up. Now he worked with a sure swiftness, cleansing the rip, cutting away a little of the tawny hair and stitching the scalp. Tracy helping him, with the cool and silent efficiency of a trained nurse.

"Her pulse is stronger now, Uncle Hyatt, I'll get her undressed and if you've got another spare nightshirt. . . ." When Tracy smiled like that her eyes crinkled almost shut.

"I got a drawer full of the damn things. One of them wagon-peddlers unloaded his stock on me. Bought 'em to git shut of him. Never use 'em. Sleep in my underwear, like a man should!" Hyatt wiped beads of sweat from his face. He was staring down at Anita Jimerson with her head on the big white pillow. Eyes closed, the heavy black-lashes flat, the ends curled a little, like she was sleeping. . . .

"She's a good woman, Tracy. Brave. She's had a hell of a tough life, I reckon."

"She's beautiful, Uncle Hyatt. And she trusts you. You give her the chance, and she will be in love with you. And she'll make you a good wife. You need a wife like that. Sleeping in your underwear! I bet she'll comb the burrs out of your mane!"

Hyatt flushed hotly. Even his ears got red. "Hey, you young rascal. You bin readin' too many paper-backed novels."

Tracy laughed softly. She pulled his head down, kissed him and sent him out of the room.

"Come back in about fifteen minutes with that nightshirt." Tracy's face was a little flushed and her eyes were too bright.

"Good thing it's a wide bed," Hyatt told her, "because you're hoppin' back in under them sheets where you belong, directly I git back. You're snake-bit. You got no business chargin' around thataway!"

OUTSIDE came the pounding of shod hoofs, and a warning challenge. Hyatt got there in time to keep Blair and Jett from tangling with his Cross H cowhands who were drifting back from town in various stages of intoxication.

"These two boys are my nephews. Is any of you sober enough to saddle a fresh horse and ride back to town and fetch the doctor?"

Whoa, now. Only one man. The rest of you sober up. Fast. There's a ruckus comin' up. Scatter out through the brush and see what become of whoever it was done that bush-whackin'. Rattle your hocks. Two of you wrangle the horse pasture and fetch in the remuda. Blair, you and Jett come on back in the house."

In the lamplit front room Hyatt scowled at his pair of nephews. One of Blair's eyes was discolored and swelling shut. Jett's short nose was swollen and his mouth bruised. Both were dirt-smeared and blood-spattered. They eyed one another like a pair of pit bulldogs.

"Now what the hell!" growled Hyatt.

"I'm beatin' ol' Slow Motion's time with Tracy, that's all," grinned the sorrel-headed Jett. "The Sheriff's a sorry loser."

"You paw her again," said Blair flatly, "and I'll tromp your guts out. She's no dance-hall wench. You're just a little too free an' easy to suit me, Outlaw."

"I'll suit you with the damndest lickin' you ever got. Trouble is with you, you can't stand a little joshin'."

Hyatt stepped in between them. "You'll both git a bellyful of scrappin' before long. Save your strength; you'll need it. Looks to me like it'd be up to Tracy to do her own choosin'. Besides she's your blood-kin. First cousin."

Jett's battered face spread in a grin. "She's adopted. Tracy Wesley adopted her when she was a yearlin'. Didn't you know that?"

Hyatt shook his head. "News to me."

"And it was news to this red-combed rooster," said Blair, "till I told 'im. Then he hollered, and pasted me one. Said we'd just as well settle it now as fu'ther up the crick, who'd be best man."

"And the scrap was on," grinned Jett. "I was only hoorawin' the funeral-faced Sheriff. He tore into me like he meant it. Gosh-amighty, did you ever laugh in your life, deacon-face? It'd limber you up. You're hidebound inside. Bin polishin' that law badge too much. I'll take you down an' thumb a laugh outa your ribs!"

"Blair," said Hyatt, "was the oldest of us brothers. He rode herd on the rest of us. My brother Jett was forever tormentin' him. You young 'uns come by it natural. Now shake hands. Then clean up. Anita Jimer-son's bin shot."

"Whew!" Jett's grin was wiped off. "Why didn't you tell us before? We thought you'd bin shot at an' missed. How is she?"

"She'll be all right I reckon. Can't tell till the doc gits here."

"We thought you was sendin' for the doc to take a look at Tracy," said Blair. "Who do you reckon would shoot Anita?"

"She was fixin' to tell me who was in the Tascosa Pool," said Hyatt. "Musta bin somebody listenin' outside the window. And we got to move fast to save Dee Jimer-son from hangin'."

CHAPTER FOUR

Manhunt

BUT it was Uncle Floyd Mallett and Stumpy they found hung. Strung up from the same limb of a big old hackberry tree. And pinned to their bloodstained shirts were chunks of torn paper. On each paper was crudely printed in their own dried blood the same cryptic warning Hyatt had come to dread: "Remember Tascosa!"

There was no trace at all of Dee Jimer-son. No sign of him at the ranch, nor at any of the other places he'd taken over. Those little ranches were deserted. His Mexican cow-hands were still in town on their after-round-up spree.

If the other members of the Tascosa Pool had arrived, Hyatt, Blair and Jett, each with a few Cross H cowpunchers, could cut no sign of them. After a week of combing the range, Hyatt gave it up as a futile hunt.

The doctor stayed on there at the Cross H ranch. Tracy, with no more than a slight limp to show for her snake-bite, worked day and night as nurse. Anita Jimer-son had not regained consciousness. Her pulse was strong and steady, her fever reduced. But most of the time she lay there, breathing evenly, her eyes closed.

Sometimes her gray-green eyes would open, but they had a blank look. And her talk was incoherent, rambling, and erratic. The scalp wound was healing rapidly. The doctor could find no skull injury. But the brain inside seemed numb. The little old cow-country doctor was puzzled. He said there was no reason he could find why she should not be fully recovered. And he laid it to shock, as much as the bullet wound. He asked Hyatt and Tracy if she had suffered some recent shock that might have affected her deeply.

Hyatt remembered the strange look in Anita Jimer-son's eyes when he told her her father was still living. But he did not feel like discussing that with the doctor. And Tracy, following Hyatt's suit, shook her head.

Hyatt wrote a hasty letter and sent it to Rebel Jimer-son at Tascosa, telling him that his daughter, Anita, and his son, Dee, were alive. And if he could make it, to come right away to the Cross H ranch. But to say nothing and keep his departure from town as secret as possible.

Hyatt and Blair and Jett wolfed a big supper and Hyatt told his two nephews to get

all the sleep they could between now and day-break when they'd be forking fresh horses and hitting the trail.

"Either they've got Dee Jimerson," Hyatt told Blair and Jett, "or they haven't got 'im. He's either dead or he's alive. He mighta throwed in strong with 'em. On the other hand he could be on the dodge in the rough hills. All his life, Dee Jimerson was trained to hate and kill us Wesleys and he might still be a-workin' at the job. And he'll be right there with the rest of the Tascosa Pool when we spring the bear trap.

"And that's what I aim to do. I'm leavin' my cowpunchers here at the ranch, and pullin' out alone at daybreak. I want you two boys to give me about a half hour head start. Then foller me. It's the only way we'll ever draw the fire from them Tascosa Pool guns."

"Like you rode into the bushwhacker gun-trap Floyd Mallett and Stumpy set for you, Hyatt?" Blair's voice was flat-toned.

"That's the general idea," nodded Hyatt.

"Dee Jimerson was in on that trap," said Blair. "Me'n Jett saw 'em. It's my guess that Dee Jimerson will be in on this 'un you aim to spring. He murdered his Uncle Floyd and Stumpy. But we don't know why. And he's got the coldest pair of eyes I ever looked into. Shoot him on sight, Hyatt. Or better yet, let me'n the Outlaw do the job. Let's all three ride together."

"The Sheriff is right," grinned Jett. "Takes him a while to figger it out, but once he gits the answer, it's as solid as his bone skull. We ain't lettin' you ride on ahead. Goshamighty, you're all we got fer a dad now, Hyatt. We ain't aimin' to lose you that quick. Don't cut us back thataway, Hyatt!"

Something like tears was in that voice that had always held a hint of laughter. Blair looked at his red-headed cousin, then nodded. "The Outlaw's right, Hyatt. Lots of ways, you're more like a dad to us than our real fathers ever were. More like an older brother. You make pardners of us. And Tracy would never look at either of us again if we let you ride off alone. . . . You see the three of us bin talkin' it over. We told Tracy we'd not let you outa our sight, night or day, till this ruckus is over. You're all we got, Hyatt."

"And you're all I got," Hyatt had to swallow a hard lump that choked his throat. "The three of you."

"Not quite all you've got, Hyatt," said Tracy from the doorway of the bunkhouse where the three of them had gone for a medicine-talk, "Anita is asking for you."

SHE led him back to the house, where Anita Jimerson sat propped up in bed by the big white pillows, her gray-green eyes clear again. Her tawny hair in twin braids, she

was a little pale, younger looking. But something like sadness was in the depths of her eyes, darkening them.

She saw the look on Hyatt's face and color came into her cheeks. Hyatt reddened to the ears as he took the hand she held out to him.

"Tracy tells me I've been out like a light for a week. Doc says it was shock. He's a good vet, Hyatt. Hit the nail on the head. That night I'd opened the window from the top to give Tracy fresh air. And just before he took that pot-shot at me, the bushwhacker shoved the top of the blind aside a few inches.

"I got a look at his face; then came the shot I didn't hear, because the bullet creased my skull before the sound of it reached my ears. I know who tried to kill me. It was dark out there, but the lamplight showed enough of his face. Once you've looked into that pair of eyes, you never forget 'em. Bar none, they're the coldest eyes I've ever seen."

Anita Jimerson stopped talking, but she still clung tightly to Hyatt's hand and her grip was like ice. Hyatt was remembering what Blair had said about Dee Jimerson's eyes. And Anita Jimerson was looking straight into Hyatt's eyes, reading them.

"It was Dee Jimerson who shot me, Hyatt. Tried to kill me."

"Dee Jimerson wouldn't try to kill his own sister." Hyatt took her cold hand in both his. Rubbing it as if he could warm its icy chill. But his words sounded weak and inadequate in his own ears.

He felt sorry for Anita Jimerson, with a pity that struck deep into the core of his cowman's heart. Then he leaned down and kissed the unsteady smile on her mouth. Her arms went around his neck and a dry sob choked her throat. She kissed the big man who was hardly more than a stranger.

"Like Tracy . . . like she says Blair and Jett feel about you, Hyatt. . . . You're a good man. The only decent man I've ever known. It's melted something inside me that was ugly and bitter and hard. And you're all I've got and I'm going to keep you. And I pray to God to send you back to me alive. . . ."

Tears welled to Anita Jimerson's eyes, and Hyatt brushed them from her cheeks with a whiskered stubble of hard jaw. After a while her voice was calm again, and when she held his hand, her hand was no longer cold, but warm and alive.

"I've felt it for a long time now, Hyatt. . . . The thing I'd always suspected even when I was a kid at Tascosa and I came home from school and there was a baby in the house, and my mother said he was my new baby brother. I was too much of a kid to understand about babies being born into this world. And my mother hadn't had the doctor. She'd been up

and around that morning, getting breakfast, getting me off to school, going about her housework. And it was no tiny newborn baby. He had a long white dress on and diapers underneath and he must have been a few months old. . . .

"There was a funeral that day. Uncle Floyd's wife had died, so I tended the baby while my mother went to the funeral. Later, Uncle Floyd married again. Married a woman called Mattie. And after my own mother died, when Uncle Floyd took us to raise, Aunt Mattie treated me as decently as she knew how. But she always hated Dee. And Stumpy would say it was because Mattie was still jealous of Uncle Floyd's first wife. . . .

"I was both sister and mother to young Dee, but he never liked me. He'd curse me, and when he grew older he would think up ways to hurt me. I'd lie for him and he'd sneer at me for covering up as best I could the ugly and treacherous things he did. I even

kill. And if you wipe 'em all out, Hyatt, you haven't killed one good man."

Something of her former hardness crept into Anita Jimerson's voice. Hyatt grinned slowly and shook his head. "From now on you and Tracy tend to the house chores. Where is that Tracy young 'un?"

"Here," called a muffled voice. "Outside the door. Listening. I peeked a couple of times. I'll rap now and come in."

And she shoved open the door and came in, with the grinning red-headed Jett at her heels.

"Blair went deacon on us," grinned Jett, "So we throwed and hogtied 'im and gagged 'im and made 'im listen, anyhow. He's layin' there in the hall."

Hyatt went out and untied Blair. Blair rubbed the raw corners of his mouth where the gag had bit in.

"When this ruckus is over, Hyatt," he said quietly, "I'm goin' to make that sorrel Outlaw slug it out, toe to toe."

GRUBSTAKE HARRY TWEED'S outpost on the Little Colorado was the jumping-off place of the Trail of the Damned—a desert high-road of whitening bones, where a hundred men had made their play against sun and sand, and lost . . . until two men came along whom even Hell would not receive! Don't miss Walt Coburn's thrilling novel, "The Gunsmoke Grubstaker"—in the big January STAR WESTERN! Buy it at your newsstand December 8th!

lied to you about Dee Jimerson fighting in the open, and about his just being a sort of hired ramrod for the Tascosa Pool. For Dee Jimerson is the head of it.

"It was Dee and Uncle Floyd. Dee was there and helped kill your brothers. He came here to kill you. And when he killed Floyd Mallett, Dee killed his own father. Like he tried to kill me."

"Why?" asked Hyatt. "Why did he kill Floyd Mallett and Stumpy?"

"Because Dee Jimerson, or Dee Mallett, whether or not he knew that was his real name, is a killer. He's cold-blooded, calculating and ruthless. He wasn't outside that window long enough to hear all of our talk. It must have looked to Dee like I had thrown in with the Wesleys. So he discarded all I'd done for him since he was a baby, and he tried to murder me. You'll have to kill Dee as you'd kill a mad dog."

"And the others?"

"Are all Malletts. Stumpy's name was Mallett. The rest are shirt-tail kin. There'll be four or five, all that's left of the renegade tribe. They know how to dodge and hide because they've been at it all their lives. And they know every bushwhacker trick in the book. You'll have to shoot first and shoot to

"You'll have to tie 'im," grinned Hyatt. "Jett knows you can lick 'im. Just like he knows you've got the inside track with Tracy. Don't let him yank your shirt tail out."

* * *

An hour later Hyatt, with Blair and Jett riding on either side, headed into the night. Hyatt was playing a hunch. They were traveling the wagon trail that led to town. About an hour behind the doctor, who had driven back to town.

The little old cow-country doctor had been given his instructions. Somewhere along the road, so Hyatt was gambling, the doctor would be stopped and questioned at gun-point by Dee Jimerson.

And he would tell the lie Hyatt had told him to tell: That Anita Jimerson was dead. That he had been fetched to the ranch to doctor Tracy for snake-bite. And that Tracy had died in spite of all he'd been able to do. That Hyatt and his two nephews were on their way to town to make funeral arrangements. And that Hyatt and Blair and Jett would be coming along the road before long.

"There's only one real good place along the road for their bushwhack," Hyatt told Blair

and Jett. "That's where we'll find the Tascosa Pool."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Remember Tascosa!"

OLD REBEL JIMERSON was a huge hulk of a man and powerful despite his seventy-five years, with a bushy white mane and whiskers and leathery skin and a pair of eyes as clear as bottle glass.

There was a jug of whiskey on the buckboard seat beside him and a .30-30 carbine in a scabbard strapped to the side of the cushioned seat. He also packed an old, long-barreled wooden-handled six-shooter that had been made over from a cap-and-ball-gun.

He was driving a livery team, and the doctor who had attended Anita Jimerson rode with him as a somewhat unwilling and slightly tipsy passenger. When they reached the dry-wash the Doc pointed to the clumps of brush on either side of the trail ahead, where the road dipped to cross the wash. Shadowy black in the gray, crimson-streaked dawn.

"That's where they stopped me."

"You kin pile out and bush up till the rookus is over, Doc. Or you kin take the lines." Old Reb pulled the cork on the jug.

The little cow-country doctor took a pull at the jug and handed it back. He picked up his shabby black leather doctor's bag, saying he reckoned he'd be of more real value if he watched from a distance and sat into the game after the shooting was over.

Old Reb pulled up, and when Doc got out, Old Reb handed him the jug and told him not to spill any. Then he drove on to the brush-flanked, sandy crossing. There he pulled up and yanked the carbine from its scabbard.

"Come outa your coyote holes, you Mallet sons!" Old Rebel Jimerson's voice was a mighty roar.

Something moved in behind the brush. The carbine in Old Reb's hands cracked. There was a hoarse scream of mortal pain from where the brush was crashing.

The livery team stampeded. Old Reb had kicked on the brake and wrapped the lines around the whipstock. Bullets whined past him and one ripped the crown of his big black hat. He stood up, braced on his thick legs, his back to the runaway team, and braced himself against the seat. His eyes swiveled right and left as he raked the brush with carbine fire, his massive, whiskered head rigid on his stiff neck. Sand and gravel from the brake-locked rear wheels showered him with a heavy yellow cloud of sand and rocks. While the grain-fed runaway team yanked the careening buckboard and its three-hundred-pound occupant across the wash.

"Let 'im go!" shouted Dee Jimerson, and swung into his saddle. "Let the damned old drunken runaway smash up!"

Some of the heavily armed renegades, all of them partly drunk, had mounted their horses and started after the runaway. The others were firing rifles from the brush. And Dee Jimerson was cursing the mounted men back into the brush when he sighted Hyatt and Blair and Jett.

The three Wesleys had spurred out of the brushy wash, not more than six-shooter distance away.

Old Reb had sprung the trap. Hyatt and his two fighting nephews picked it up from there. Their spewing guns knocked three of Dee's shirt-tail renegade kin out of their saddles the first volley. And then Blair and Jett were taking the others, while Hyatt charged Dee Jimerson.

Hyatt stood high in his stirrups, bridle reins dropped over his saddle horn, shooting over his gun-trained horse's head. He dropped his saddle gun and jerked his six-shooter, and he and Dee Jimerson met head on, their guns spitting fire. Their horses swerved off and Hyatt's left stirrup locked with Dee's left stirrup, and Dee's bullet cut Hyatt's belt as Hyatt shot straight at the lean-jawed face with its cold bleak eyes. Suddenly a black hole showed at the bridge of Dee's nose. Those bleak eyes never blinked as he went over backwards, dead in his saddle, until he lay sprawled in the sand.

Hyatt's left arm dangled limply, broken below the shoulder. There was a bullet rip along one thigh. But there was a twisted grin on his face and he sat straight as he reined his horse around the brush clump.

Horses were traveling crabwise, dragging the bridle reins, saddles emptied. Hyatt was the only man on either side who still sat his horse. There were two Mallett renegades still alive and on the fight. Hyatt rode them down and shot them.

Then he sighted Blair and Jett. Blair squatted on one knee alongside Jett, who was lying there on the ground, his face so white that the freckles were a black smear across his forced grin.

Blair's voice was a croaking sob. "The damned dirty, yellow-bellied, bushwhackin' snakes!"

"Don't weaken, Sheriff," Jett's grin was pain-twisted. "We give 'em a bellyful, didn't we?"

"You gotta live, Jett!" Blair was white-lipped. "Tracy's waitin' for you!"

"Tracy's waitin' for you, you slow-motion bonehead! I got a wife and half a dozen kids a-waitin' for me back in Cheyenne. . . . Well, she ain't my wife yet. And the kids won't git born till I fetch her here from her Wyoming

schoolmarm job and we git hitched by a sky-pilot. But I'm practic'ly a family man. . . . Her name's Sue and she's got the purtiest yaller hair in the world. You better tie onto Tracy before some rank outsider horns you outa. . . ." Jett's voice trailed into a whisper and his eyes closed and he lay back on the sandy ground.

There was the rattle of buckboard wheels and Old Rebel Jimerson drove his sweat-dripping, blowing team back. And he twisted sideways on the seat and his green eyes swiveled as his six-shooter covered Hyatt.

"You don't look like a damned lantern-jawed Jayhawker Mallett!" he bellowed.

"I'm Hyatt Wesley. These is my nephews. Blair and Jett. Long time no see you, Rebel!"

"Be back directly!" roared Old Reb Jimerson. He shoved the six-shooter back into its old holster and flicked the buggywhip along the sweaty rumps of the leg-weary livery team.

OLD REB picked up the doctor with his black bag and the jug. And a few minutes later the doctor looked up from his examination of the red-headed Jett.

"This rooster's too game to die," he smiled up at Hyatt and Blair. "A few weeks in bed and he'll be up and dealing Blair more misery. Pad the back of the buckboard with saddle blankets and persuade that white-whiskered old son that he ain't drivin' a hose cart to a fire. Now let's patch you and Blair up. That Old Rebel's hide might be punctured but if it is he'll leak straight booze!"

When the Cross H cowpunchers rode up there was nothing left for them to do but take care of the dead Mallett renegades. They'd hold a drunken wake in town for Dee Jimerson.

Jett blinked open his eyes when they got him stretched out on sweaty saddle blankets on the bed of the buckboard. He grinned at them.

"I'll name the first kid Hyatt. There's always a runt, but I won't drown 'im. I'll just call 'im Blair and let 'im suffer through life with the handicap. . . . Wake me in time for supper."

"You damned Outlaw. . . !" Blair's voice choked. "You knowed you had a whuppin' a-comin'. You taken this way to slide out of it."

Old Rebel Jimerson chuckled and told Doc to throw the cork away, as they headed along the wagon road to the Cross H ranch. They sent Hyatt and Blair ahead with the news and to get Jett's bed ready.

"Tell me again, Doc," said Old Reb Jimerson, "what does that Anita young 'un of mine look like. Grown up, you say. Yep, I reckon

she ain't a pigtailed kid no more. Hyatt says she's the one that cut me down when the Mallett's Tascosa Pool hung me. . . . Purty, yuh say, Doc?"

"Tracy says she's as beautiful as an angel. . . . Watch those rocks in the road."

"Feed Jett another dram from the jug, Doc. He's tough like his sorrel-maned daddy. Have a snort, Jett?"

Jett said he would, just to drown the shame of riding back in the wagon bed. "That dog-goned Blair," he said. "Got between me'n them Malletts twice, three times, tryin' to save my hide. . . . That's good likker, Reb."

There was a girl back in Wyoming; a yellow-haired schoolmarm. And her name was Sue. He'd danced with her once. But she'd been a long ways out of his young outlaw reach then. Mebbe now. . . .

But Hyatt knew. Hyatt was a hard man to fool. And when he'd helped ease Jett into the buckboard Hyatt had given him that slow grin.

"You'll do to take along, you Outlaw liar," Hyatt had said. Hyatt knew. And it had warmed Jett better than Old Reb's whisky.

That meeting between Old Reb and Anita was something they would all remember. The first time tears had ever dimmed the hard green eyes of the tough old Rebel.

And a month later when a little golden-haired schoolmarm from Wyoming named Sue actually did show up at the Cross H ranch, Anita and Tracy were with her. They had gone after her, brought her back. Though Sue told Anita and Tracy that she wasn't hard to persuade.

Jett was the only one at the Cross H ranch who had no knowledge of Sue's coming. And he stood there, off balance for once, when Sue swung from her horse and threw her arms around his neck, while they all stood around watching.

Then Sue, crimson-faced but game, went through with the rest of it. "Well!" she eyed him with his week's growth of round-up whiskers, "is that the best you can do about welcoming the mother of your six children?"

Old Rebel Jimerson used to play the fiddle at all the Tascosa wedding dances. He'd sent back for his fiddle and a barrel of whisky. Doc showed up with the preacher. The Chinaman had been cooking all week. The big barn had been cleaned out and the new board floor sprinkled with cornmeal.

The jovial bellow of Old Rebel Jimerson filled the air:

"Pardners fer the grand march! Hyatt and Anita up on the point! Blair and Tracy, Jett and Sue in the swing! Let the drags folleer suit! Nary a Mallett in the herd! Remember Tascosa!"

THE END



He threw himself
across the steer. . . .

By FRANK BONHAM

I'VE GOT SPURS

Settling down to a cowpuncher's job was all right for others, but Will Garrett's fancy rodeo spurs kept singing of the far-off places and purses. And to hell with any man, woman, or pardner-in-need who tried to stop him!

IT WAS mid-morning when Will Garrett reached Picacho. Wagons were still rattling toward the fairgrounds and the stream of ranchers and townsmen was moving along the chinaberry-shaded walks. He rode through the traffic-choked street, feeling the excitement like a pressure. You could follow the shows for years, but if you were born to a contest saddle there was something new and

compelling about the pageant every spring.

His glance kept picking through the crowd. He saw a lot of boys he knew, punchers who had come in from all the big and little ranches around Picacho, but he saw none of his own crowd. None of the money riders would let themselves be caught for the opening, as he had, in a whistle-stop like Picacho. They'd be shaking the kinks out of their ropes in Dallas, Albuquerque and Cheyenne.

He did not see Chet Lockhart, though he had his word he would be on hand. Chet would wonder why they had to meet in a cowtown where a fifty-dollar purse was big money; but he would be here. Will kept hoping, with a sort of last-chance desperation, that he would run into him in town, so that they could make their plans and seal the bargain over a couple of drinks, before anything happened to change things.

It had been in his mind all morning that he would run into Margaret first and lose his head again, forgetting all the good resolutions he had made during the long lonely months at Cedar Tank Camp. Forgetting he already had a bride, and her name was Rodeo.

He tried to think of Margaret with resentment, but that was not the name for the bitter-sweet hurt that the thought of her awoke in him. They got into a man's mind subtly, these quiet-eyed girls with their sweet, disarming ways.

One minute he was thinking: "She's a great girl. If I was the marrying kind, she'd be the one. But she'll never try to put the hooks into me."

And then, all of a sudden she was in his heart and his blood like a fever, and he'd sell his chances of ever amounting to a lead dollar to win her.

Will saw a familiar white Stetson in the crowd; but he was too late to shift his gaze before Sam Brennan, Margaret's father and his boss, had raised his arm and shouted: "Will! I want to see you."

Sam Brennan, on whose Rafter outfit he had wintered as a line rider, watched him ride over and loop his reins about a hitching rack. He was a compact-shouldered man of sixty, gray-mustached and yet not old, except in the ways of men and horses. He was decked out in his going-East clothes, a gray suit, with the trousers tucked inside brown boots.

"Got any scruples against drinking before a show?" Brennan inquired.

"I might just take a dust-cutter," Will smiled.

They went into the Buckhorn, Brennan's glance measuring the long, meatless look of him against a recollection he had. "Been working too hard," he stated. "You've lost weight."

Will made a wry smile. "You ought to know

a line-rider don't get up till sundown, and then only to butcher himself another beef."

"That's what they tell me," Brennan said. He pulled out a roll of bills and slipped the rubber band onto his wrist, and Will had the impression that there was something deep and prodding on his mind. "I've got your name on a few of these. Three month's wages ought to pay your entry fees. What contests you riding in?"

"Bulldogging. Maybe the calf-roping. I can make more money breaking horses than riding these ornery broncs for the purses they've got up."

Sam Brennan remarked, looking steadily into Will's eyes: "You didn't seem to think so last winter, Will. Wasn't I paying you enough?"

He had touched a raw spot, and Will's blush was quick and hot. "Why, sure, Sam! As much as anybody. Only when you figure to be topping the rough ones very long you've got to make all you can out of each. If I'd been breaking horses all winter, I'd be all crippled up by now. That's why I asked you to let me ride fence."

Brennan replaced the money. "I guess that's right. But you're the first man that ever asked me to let him ride fence without he was dodging the law."

Both men glanced up as a stringy cowboy in denims and a brushpopper jacket, a flat-topped Stetson hanging by the lanyard between his shoulder-blades, joined them. Jude Hall, Brennan's range boss, had been drinking a little; his manner and his voice were on the free and loud side.

"Sam," he charged, with an arm around each of them, "you aren't aiming to risk any money on this sheepherder's riding, are you?"

"I'm not riding," said Will. "Like to put up some side money on the 'dogging?"

"What's wrong with the broncs?" Hall persisted.

Will did not want to go into it again, and said only: "I'm not riding."

"Well," said Jude, "you know what they say: 'Never was a horse that couldn't be rode; never was a man that couldn't be throwed.' I'm referring," he added, "to riding."

Will felt the blood rush hot to his head, and put down his drink. Jude Hall's cap had been set for Margaret Brennan long before Will signed on with the Rafter. He was a man who noticed too much and used his head too little. He was also a man whose eyes noticed-Margaret too often, Will thought.

Sam Brennan took Will's elbow and moved between them. He said, "Well, we'll see you out there, Jude," and moved Will into the crowd.

They were silent when they reached the

street, Will's fingers slowly untying his bridle reins. Just before he mounted the rancher said: "Margaret was sort of looking for you to stop by yesterday, Will."

Will's eyes busied themselves with the stirrup he was turning. "I know," he said. "I was sorry about that. But I couldn't get away yesterday, so I came by McKelligan Canyon this morning."

"Can't talk you into staying on this summer, I suppose?" Brennan remarked.

"I reckon not. I'll be leaving right after the show. I'm playing it double this season with an old rodeo partner of mine—Chet Lockhart. You'll see him ride today."

Sam Brennan stepped back to the walk, his eyes very sober. "Well, good luck, son. See you out there."

THE arena and pens had been laid out in a cleared area between the river and the hills, so that the curving arm of the foothills raised a natural grandstand. West of the field was the sandy bosque with its high ceiling of cottonwood boughs, and, beyond, the shallows of Hueco Creek.

Bawling cattle were being prodded into the pens; the endless complaining of the calves sounded adenoidally above the turmoil. The space behind the chutes was thronged with cowboys, all talking or laughing, expending the stored-up good spirits born in the monotony of winter. The judges, a half-dozen of the more prosperous ranchers, were up on the shaded platform, eating sandwiches and drinking cold beer.

The tang of the scene went sharply into Will Garrett. There was something about it that any man who wasn't blind and deaf had to respond to. It stirred up a quavery feeling of wanting to laugh; and yet, stronger than that, it brought a tightness into his throat.

He reined the grulla, Conejo, toward the river, intending to water the horse before he looked up Chet Lockhart. It was as he worked his way through the cluster of wagons, many filled with lunching ranch families, that he heard Margaret's voice. As though his mind were tuned to that sound, it reached him as distinctly as though hers had been the only voice among the trees.

He looked around and saw her on the seat of a flat-bed wagon, beneath a great cottonwood. She had her back to him and was doling out sandwiches to two children whom Will recognized as Duffy Hearn's. Guiding the horse over, he stopped beside the wagon.

Margaret's face turned up, quick and startled, and then her lips relaxed into a smile, and she said: "Why—Will Garrett!"

As swiftly as that were all his defenses swept away, all the words so carefully chosen; and the only word left in him was: "Mar-

garet!" He sat there looking down at her, knowing that she was reading in his face all the things he had promised himself not to say.

Duffy Hearn's oldest boy, Tom, broke the endless pause. He was eight, with his father's gray eyes and light hair. He looked pretty thin, and his pants and shirt had obviously been cut down. He had a wide-eyed stare for Will's silver-conchoed saddle and longshanked bronc spurs.

"Hello, Mr. Garrett!" he said. "Dad's lookin' for you. D'you see him?"

"I just got in, Tom. I'll look him up."

"Mom couldn't come," Tom volunteered.

"Me and Joe's going to have a little sister."

"Why, that'll be nice," Will said.

Margaret smiled and turned her eyes from the youngster. "Ellen thought it best not to try to make the trip. The baby's due in August. Ira Barkley's wife went over to stay with her."

Will nodded, trying to take his eyes off her and not able to. He saw in her sweetly grave features all the softness and gentleness a man could desire in life. Her hair was caught back with a blue ribbon, and he remembered how it had felt, like combed silk, under his fingers that day at Chimney Rock.

He knew she was waiting for some kind of explanation, but the words went together clumsily. "I'd have stopped by yesterday, Margaret, but I couldn't leave till this morning. Of course I'd have been seeing you here before I leave tonight, anyway."

He dismounted and dropped the split-reins of the bridle. He fished a coin from his pocket and tossed it up to Tom. "They're selling pop over by the judges' stand, Tom. You boys like some?"

Tom said: "I just reckon we would!" He jumped down and reached up to help Bobby, who was only four. They went running off through the wagons.

Will mounted to the seat. He began to roll a cigarette, frowning. "This is pretty late, Margaret," he said, "but I want to apologize for that day at Chimney Rock."

Margaret sat there looking down at the lunch box in her lap. "You don't owe me an apology. If a girl thinks a man means it, a kiss can be a compliment. But—don't do anything now that you'll regret later."

"No," said Will. "I've thought it out pretty close. I guess riding's my game. Punchin' cows is all right, if a man's spurs don't keep talking to him. Mine do."

"Then you're not going in with Duffy? Dad said he'd mentioned a partnership to you last fall."

"There's nothing in it for either of us. I'd like to help Duffy. But I'd get to feeling cramped, and then the trouble would start." He discarded the cigarette, unconscious that

he had failed to light it. "I've got a deal on with an old rodeo partner, name of Chet Lockhart. We were figuring a while back that if a couple of smart riders teamed up, doing all their own hazing as well as splitting the purses on the bronc contests, they'd make some sure and steady money. I had a letter from him just before the end of last season saying he'd like to give it a whirl this year. So we're teaming up."

He was suddenly looking off through the trees. "That looks like Chet's black over by the barbecue pit. He won't be far off."

There was an impatience in him that she was quick to sense, and she said: "Why don't you look him up? The roping will start before long."

Will put his foot on a spoke of the wheel and swung down. He reached up, his fingers for a moment strong about hers. But all the things he wanted to say were blocked by a stubborn dam of logic. "I'll see you before I leave, Margaret," he said.

He rode off, both of them realizing he would not be back, that this was the end of the dream that had begun at Chimney Rock.

CHET LOCKHART was having a sandwich with Jude Hall and a handful of local punchers when Will located him. Someone had a bottle, and Chet was taking a pull at it as Will came up, and said: "Still got those bad habits, Chet?"

Chet passed the bottle along and, standing, took Will's hand, a rangy black-haired man with sun-darkened features and bone-white teeth. "Still got 'em!" he said. "Brother, I deserve a drink after finding this burg! Couldn't you have found a place with over a hundred population? Looks like it's up to you and I to show Picacho how they do it in Pendleton!"

His laughter was not shared, and Will was sorry the remark had been made. He asked quickly: "Where'd you spend the winter?"

"Mexico," Chet said casually. "Friend of mine raises bucking stock near Chihuahua. He'd been after me for two years to ride for him winters. But when they pay you in pesos, the profit ain't in it. All I got out of it was a pair of Ortega boots."

They all glanced at his boots, which were wine-colored Morocco kid, quilted and stitched, the kind of boots a cowboy occasionally buys instead of a new saddle. Again Will felt the rub of embarrassment: It was unbecoming a man to draw attention to his possessions when they made another's look cheap.

"Ever see a Mex puncher bust wild cows?" Chet asked the group at large. "Maybe you think a rodeo man's rough when he fair-grounds a steer. . . ." He went into a yarn about Mexican stock-working methods.

Someone brought Will a sandwich and he ate it slowly, listening to Chet Lockhart and thinking how much change a couple of years could put on a man. Or was it just that his enthusiasm had daubed a little guilt on Chet that was bound to rub off? He thought that did not explain all of it. Chet had too much around the middle for a top bronc man. And Will did not subscribe to the whiskey-and-horses doctrine a lot of riders seemed to endorse. In a tactful way, he'd have to say something to Chet about that one day.

Presently Jude Hall asked: "What you riding in, Chet? I want to be sure I don't get in the same event."

"Saddle broncs," Chet Lockhart said. "The purse will just about pay my stable bill."

Jude glanced in the direction of the chutes. "They're closing the books," he said to Will. "Better get your number if you're going to ride." As Will stood up he said, "Some of us are going to petition for lap-and-tap rules. Want me to add your name?"

"What's wrong with free-for-all?" Will retorted. Instantly he regretted it. Free-for-all rules meant no rules; they meant broken bones and horn-wounds. That might not matter to a hair-brain like Hall, but it did to the man who counted odds. What scraped sharpest was that it was jealousy that gave Hall the ability to anger him so easily: Jealousy over a girl Will would not see again.

"Free-for-all, then," said Jude, his eyes quick and bright.

Chet already had his brassard, but he went toward the chutes with Will. "You don't like that fellow, do you?" he said.

"I'm not sending him any Valentines. But if I break my neck it's my own fault."

"You've got to keep your head," Chet agreed. "That's something I learned a long time ago. I think I can teach you some things, Will. What do you say we start splitting the take, as of today?"

Afterwards Will could not explain why he refused, almost rudely. "I want to settle this thing with Hall first," he said.

Chet looked at him curiously. He said, "All right," and went back to his horse.

WILL did not see Duffy Hearn until the calf-roping was under way. He drew a tricky animal that kept his hazy busy keeping it away from the fence. By the time the flag went down, fifteen and two-fifths seconds had ticked off. Will loped back, frowning and dissatisfied.

That was when he saw Duffy, standing back of the barrier waiting for him. They gripped hands, and Will Garrett knew a twinge of guilt in the presence of this quiet little cowpuncher with whom he had gone to school. Duffy needed a partner—that was

written on him in capital letters—and Will knew he was going to refuse.

Duffy said: "Nice tie, boy. That calf was headin' for water."

"Thanks," said Will. He nodded at the arm-band the other wore. "Going to take some of that money away from me?"

"Going to try," Duffy smiled.

He looked, Will thought, as though he needed the money, at that. He noticed the excessive leanness of his face, the lines a tool called worry had scraped about the mouth and eyes. He was wearing denims which had been washed until they were so threadbare that only the copper rivets held them together.

"How are things out at Big Pine Meadow?" Will asked.

Duffy's slow voice was not the kind to take the color of any strong emotion. He was a patient, determined man who did not discourage easily. But there was a tired and baffled look about his eyes as though he had come up against a wall that rebuilt itself as fast as he pulled it down.

"Why, pretty good," he said. "Keep pretty busy. I'm running about a month behind right now on the calf tally."

"How many men are you working?"

"I've got a couple of Mexicans. Pretty good men, when I'm standing over them." He paused, looking away, and then suddenly bringing his gaze back to Will. "I could sure use a pardner, Will. I've got the best range in New Mexico—all-year springs, plenty of graze—well, you know the land as well as I do. But I've sort of got behind the last three years, what with the kids and all. There's more than one man can do, and I can't pay wages. I've got about five hundred to pay off on the place next month. I guess you know what it means when you start selling your herd-stuff. I'd cut you in for a half-interest for just that much, Will. Have you thought it over?"

"I wish I could do it, Duffy," Will told him. "There isn't a better man to tie up with. But you know me—can't sit still from one rodeo season to the next. But I've got a couple of hundred, if it would help—"

Duffy looked down and with his toe rubbed a cigarette butt into the dirt. "I guess not; but thanks. We'll get along. And, Will, I know how you feel about it." He smiled. "Well, I'd better be getting back to the wagon."

"I'm sorry," Will said. And as Duffy moved away: "What contest are you in?"

"The bulldogging," Duffy Hearn said.

Will Garrett spoke imperatively. "You don't want to tackle those steers today, Duffy. Jude Hall's jobbed us into a free-for-all."

"I heard it was you."

"Well—under pressure. But there's no show in it for a family man. The purse is

only a hundred, and what's that to a busted arm?"

"I've already got my ten on it," Duffy said. "I'll see you later."

Guilt assailed Will, and an anger that included both Duffy and Jude Hall.

No man with kids and a wife needed money that bad. Or did a family make that much difference in the way a man figured things?

The weight of it was in the back of Will's mind all through the roping. He came off with third money after a performance he could have bettered six days out of a week. A man had to be right in his mind when he went into the arena. He wanted to be settled, not pulled this way and that by vague worries.

A BOY named Bill Carney gave Chet Lockhart a run for it in the saddle bronc contest. Carney was a tough youngster from the mountain country, where they rode anything with hair on it. He spurred with a flashy circle-saw motion that drove the horse wild, and he sat his saddle like a monkey on a volcano, yelling and waving his hat. When the flanker took him off he was bleeding from the nose and the horse had more spur-marks than the second bar of a corral fence.

"Nothing wrong with that boy," Will thought. He watched Chet Lockhart come out on a savage Mexican pony that seemed to know nothing but straight-away jumping. Chet was sure and easy; he didn't take any chances and he was contesting right up to the flag.

But Will, who had seen a lot of riding, knew why the horse bucked straight-away. Chet didn't give it a chance to sunfish. He yanked the bucking rein and spurred each time the animal came down, keeping it off balance. That was all right in the breaking pens; but behind the chutes they called it cheating the horse.

"Maybe he's been riding too long," Will said to himself. "Maybe you get lazy."

A dispute among the judges as to whether or not Bill Carney's hat had touched his horse resulted in a draw between him and Chet, to be run off after the bulldogging.

Standing with Will, Chet Lockhart snorted. "I had it six ways from nothing," he stated.

"You were a mile behind the kid," Will told him.

"How do you figure that?"

"If you didn't want to ride a bucking horse," Will said, "you should have entered the wild-cow milking." He walked off.

A strange anemia attacked the bulldogging entries, once it became known that Association rules were suspended. Jude Hall drew second ride of the six, Will followed him, and Duffy Hearn pulled number five. Bill Carney took the first steer, but without flash. Will sat up

on the rail as Jude Hall got set for his ride.

Hall kept the dogging-bat high and his eyes were on the gray steer on the other side of the fence. Will's impression was that he would gladly trade places with any man in the arena at this moment. When he and the steer got down to fundamentals, it would be the man's craft or the animal's strength; and there was a lot of bluff in the Rafter cowboy and none in the steer.

Hall cracked the dogging-bat down as the barrier fell. The horse was immediately alongside the running steer. Hall did not wait to lose his nerve. He hurled himself upon the animal's neck and forced the nigh horn down until it pegged in the dirt.

Steer and man disappeared in dust, executing a wild hoolihan. When the breeze swept it away, the steer lay there stunned, its broken horn-stump spouting blood; Jude Hall reposed on his back twenty feet away, and Doc Byerly ran out with his bag.

Hall's injury apparently was as simple as having had the wind knocked out of him. Two of the field hands helped him up and he walked off through the sounds of enthusiastic applause.

There was more applause when a mark of eight and one-fifth seconds was announced a moment later.

Will Garrett, getting into the saddle, swore under his breath. It was good time—almost record time. He looked down at Jude Hall, who was limping over to the Brennan wagon, and suddenly an anger came up in him bitter and full, and he wanted to beat that time more than anything in the world. He wanted to whip Hall soundly, and then ride out of here

and cauterize the imprint of Margaret's eyes and voice forever from his mind.

A handler said, "Ready, Will?" and Will nodded and gave all his attention to what was ahead. The steer was a big heavy-jointed beast from the scrub-brush, its horns honed to needle points. It was kicking out at the chute bars and ramming its great head against the barrier until the whole cage rocked.

The gate banged open and the animal came out with its head down. Will crossed the foul line with his left foot already clear of the stirrup. As he came up beside the steer he canted his body across it. He got the horns in his grasp and dropped, his chest coming against the warm, straining neck and his body swinging underneath, in front of the pounding hoofs.

He was conscious of one sharp stab of pain in his thigh. The steer, tripped clean, grunted and went down. Will wrapped himself like an inverted yoke about its neck, so that as the half-ton of beef struck the earth, he was in the arch formed by chin and brisket. He felt in his body the strong crack of neck-bones breaking.

Suddenly it was finished, the steer a mountain of dirty hide beyond him, and Will was getting unsteadily to his feet. The sound of the applause breaking loose was a lifting thrill.

He saw the timekeeper lay down his stopwatch and reach for the megaphone, and the time startled even him. "Seven and two-fifths!"

IT WAS too good to beat. Will looked over at the Brennan wagon and Sam and Margaret waved; but Jude Hall sat there with

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his head down and his hat masking his face.

Will had a look at Duffy Hearn's face before he went out after his steer. There was something in it that banked any glow remaining from his own success. It showed a fierce and hopeless desperation, which told Will that he was going to throw all he had into this fight. A man's need must be grim and very compelling, Will reckoned, to make him risk everything he cherished for a few dollars.

Duffy shouted: "Let 'im out! I got 'im!" and the muffled pound of hoofs shook the earth.

Will gave his attention to the cigarette he was building. He had watched a lot of rides, but he didn't want to see this one. He heard a many-throated yell which broke on a gasp. Men began to run onto the field; it was quiet except for the sound of their spurred boots and farther off, the cries of hazers trying to corral the steer.

Will looked up. A knot of men hid Duffy, but presently it opened up and two men came out carrying him. Ring Bartlett, the rodeo clown, came booming out of a pen on his trained mule, trying to rope a goat. There was some laughter that eased the tension off a little. Will went over to the big shade tree where they were working on Duffy.

He found Sam Brennan in the group, and Sam said only, "Busted hip."

Will Garrett went toward the river, feeling as though a plow had been dragged through him. Duffy's face came before him, with its slow smile. "*Thanks, Will, but I guess not. We'll get along.*"

He stood by the river, watching the surface crease and tumble and flash. The westering sun sifted its gold through the slanting shadows among the trees. Will bent to dip up a drink with the brim of his hat.

It was at this moment that he saw Chet Lockhart sitting cross-legged on the sand downstream. Chet had his brown bullhide chaps off and one of them was laid across his lap. He poured something from a tin can on it and then began to work it in with his fingers.

Chet heard his boots grating on the sand and stood up, waving at Will and beginning to buckle the chaps on. A spur moved against the can and tipped it over.

Will stopped before him, a lean shape of a man with an angry flush along the slant of his cheekbones. He said: "What's the matter, Chet? Competition too tough for you?"

Chet's eyes met his, dropped, and defiantly moved back again. "I don't get you. There's no competition around this place."

"If there isn't, it's because you're killing it." Will picked up the can, ran his finger around the inside and tasted the liquid that came off the rusty metal. "Sugar," he said levelly.

Chet tucked his hands in his hip pockets. He put a challenge in his narrow features. "You've got a lot to learn," he said. "If you're going to stay in this game, you've got to make it easy on yourself. The fewer spills you take, the longer you'll be riding. These rubes don't know a square ride from a jobbed one. What's the difference, so the crowd gets a show?"

"The difference," said Will, "is that any man who cheats the horse is yellow. You're going to need a money-pardner when you get back to the big shows. If you can't stick the saddle without sugarin' your chaps, you ought to be tossing hay bales in a livery stable."

Chet moved swiftly, the hot flood of his anger breaking the dam of caution. Will saw the fist coming up and tried to block it with his shoulder, but the blow struck sharply against his ear. Chet was upon him savagely, crowding him back with body blows until Will's spur caught against a rock and he went down.

He was on his knees as Chet's foot drove in. He caught his boot and twisted it until Chet fell beside him. Will stood up. He let Chet get to his feet before he stabbed his left hand into his face, stunning him and bringing the blood from his mouth and nose. His right went in, throwing the whole force of his shoulder against the point of Chet's jaw.

He watched the sharp features loosen and a slackness come into the long limbs, and saw Chet go down and lie with his cheek against the sand.

He went over and washed his face in the cold water of the stream. For a time he stood there, letting the dry air chill his skin, the coolness going through and through him. A deep and quiet satisfaction filled him, a fullness that was not like anything the rodeo had ever brought. This was where the rodeo trail ended, here on the sand beside another man who'd had his values all twisted up, but who'd never got them sorted out.

He went back through the trees, his feet and his thoughts moving slowly and carefully.

A man was put here to be useful and happy. If he had to keep fighting himself and justifying what he was doing, why, it showed something was wrong. If he had to choose between friends like Duffy Hearn, sound, unvarnished men as solid as an oak log, and the quick friendships of the arena, why, there was no choice at all.

He spoke to Duffy just before they took him into town in Doc Byerly's surrey. Duffy's eyes were beginning to grow dull with morphine, but he recognized Will and made a faint grin.

The thing Will asked him took the grin away. He looked as though he thought there were better times to make useless talk.

Will asked him: "How many cows are you running out there?"

Duffy looked away, and he sounded tired. "Maybe four hundred," he murmured.

"Then we ought to have a couple of good hands till after the beef round-up," Will said. "I've got enough laid by to square things with the bank and carry us that long. I'll pick up a load of chuck and take Bobby and Tom out tomorrow."

Duffy looked at Will very soberly. "Will," he said, "the rodeo's your game. Ellen and I'll make out till I'm riding again."

Will reached down and unfastened his spurs. He stood there spinning the rowel of

one spur. "Maybe Tom would like these things," he said. "A cowpuncher looks damn' silly all decorated up like a circus lady. I'm quitting the game, Duffy. There's no show in it for a family man."

Duffy smiled, suddenly knowing this was a decision he had been a long time making. He said: "There sure ain't, Will. No show at all. Takes something like a cracked hip to teach a man, don't it?"

Will took a long breath, thinking about Chet Lockhart, and the old days of tinsel and glory, and about Margaret. "Sometimes," he told him, "it takes more than that. But then I don't think he forgets."

THEY CALLED 'EM AS THEY SAW 'EM

By HOWARD C. KEGLEY

GRUB GULCH, Poker Flat, Fiddletown, Melones, Volcano, West Point, Drytown, Gold Run, You Bet, Rough and Ready, Whiskey Slide and dozens of other quaint and curious places are graven into the history of the Southern Sierras, and as you pass each place you wonder how on earth it ever got that name.

Back in the mountains not far from Tulare someone found gold in the Sixties. Fifty miles from a hardware store, the miner could get no door-latch, but down in the gulch was an old dead cow, the tail of which was still in usable condition, so he chopped off her tail and nailed it on the door as a latch.

When a community sprang up, it seemed desirable to give it a name. The citizens wanted to honor the town's first resident, so they decided to name it Tailholt, and the name lingers on, even to this day, although the camp has crumbled back to earth.

Whiskey Slide is another town which got its name in much the same manner. A mining camp sprang up on the steep slopes of the Sierra Nevadas. In course of time, its citizens put in for a post office, and to celebrate the establishment of their town in fitting manner, some of the boys brought up a barrel of whiskey. As they were hauling it up to camp and were on the outside edge of the steep grade, the endgate fell out of the wagon and the barrel of whiskey fell out, and slid down the gulch to the valley below. What could have been more natural than naming that community Whiskey Slide? The little camp known as Port Wine got its name in much the same way.

Farther up the country, far back on the Mother Lode, you might come across a little

community known as Shirt-tail Bar. When gold-seekers turned a bend in the stream in search of new diggings, came upon a whiskered miner, clad in nothing but an old shirt, panning gold on a sand-bar in mid-stream.

He explained that, like them, he had worked his way to that point, where he found rich panning. Instead of going to town for supplies, he kept on working till his tattered old overalls parted company with him. Being all alone in the wilderness, he kept going right along with his work, clad in nothing but a shirt, until the other miners arrived. Because the new community deserved a name, they honored its discoverer by naming the place Shirt-tail Bar.

Warlike Apaches were as numerous at rattlesnakes in southeastern Arizona when Ed Schieffelin, a prospector, was seeking his fortune there. Colonel Al Sieber, commanding cavalry, found Schieffelin seated on a boulder, apparently unmindful of lurking danger.

The Colonel asked Ed what he was looking for. His answer was that he was hunting for a good mine. "I'll tell you what you'll find," sang out the Colonel lustily, "you'll find your Tombstone here."

Schieffelin laughed it off, and kept up the search. In 1877 he found a black mountain which assayed \$100 to \$2,200 silver to the ton. He named that mine "The Lucky Cuss," and it made him millions.

A roaring camp sprang up. Schieffelin, remembering what Colonel Sieber had said, named it Tombstone. When he died he had them bury him in a grave hewn out of the silver ore in that mountainside, so it really was his tombstone.

BATTLE-HYMN FOR

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

Doug Deverell, ex-Texas Ranger, rode his strangest manhunt trail when he made that race to find his lost, disgraced pardner. . . . And found himself trapped in a madman's frontier empire, from which no honest man could ride out alive. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

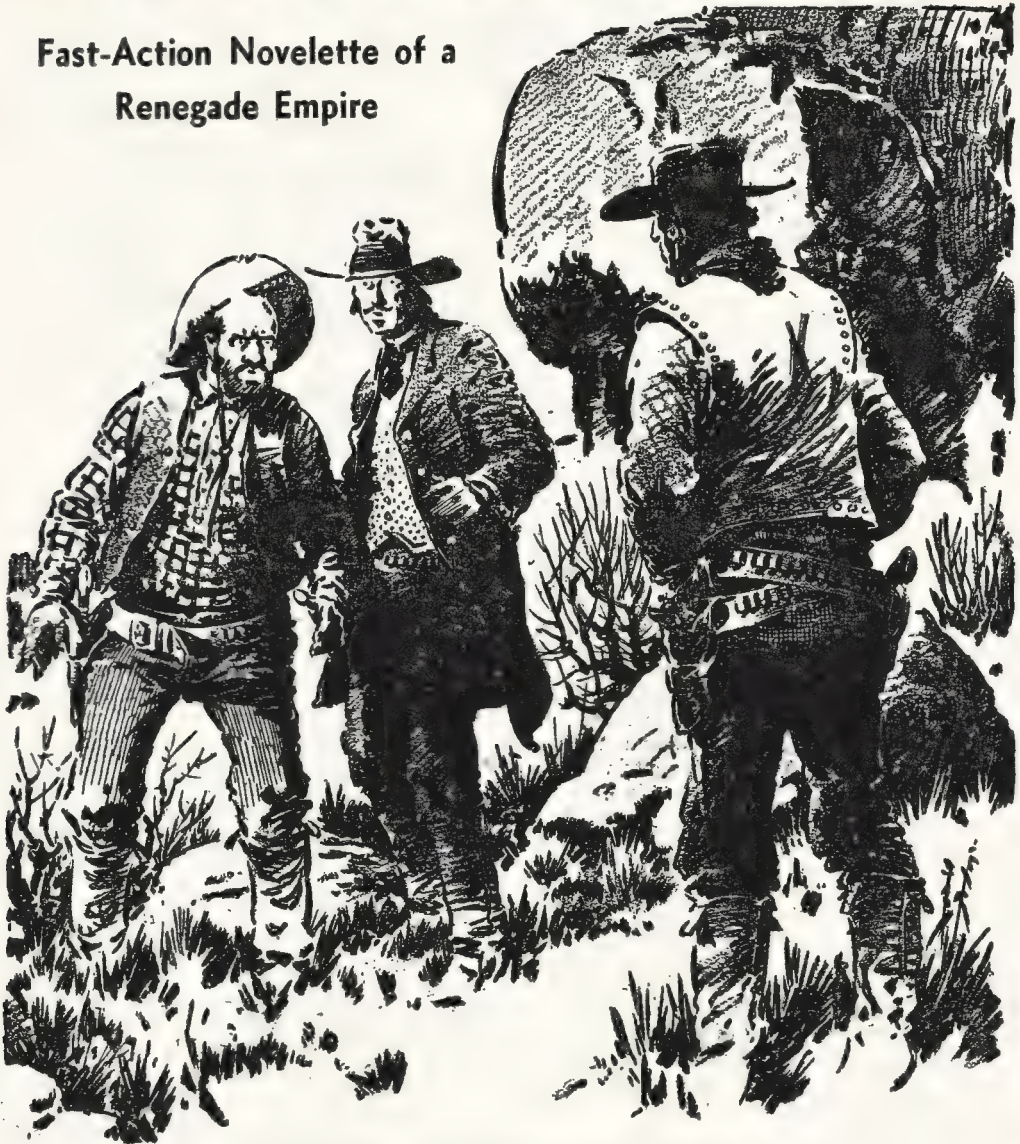
Lone Wolf!

AT A corner table in Beaupre's Arcade Saloon, the California Ranger drank his rye, lighted his cigar and, as carefully as if they were part of his person, cleaned and loaded his pistols. Then he sat relaxed as a sleeping cat—a great, tawny lion of a man, scowling darkly as he waited for the morning



THE WASHOE WAR

Fast-Action Novelette of a
Renegade Empire



"To hell with that!" rasped Cherub, his hand inching toward his gun. . . .

stage to leave Downieville. He held aloof.

The few early patrons eyed him askance, and with a measure of wonder, for this was the man who had slain the great Joaquin, and was now on the trail of the man who had murdered another ranger here in Downieville, hardly a month before.

One of the patrons detached himself from the bar and walked over; tall, bronzed and possessed of the bowed and springy step com-

mon to horsemen the world over. He was smiling a little as he sat down across the table from the ranger.

The ranger said: "Well, you might be playing any sort of game, and damned well. Buy you a drink?"

"I've had one—my limit."

"I never use it when I'm working. Right now I'm taking it easy till I get to Sacramento, where I'll organize a manhunt."

"Curly Pickett?"

The lawman lifted his brows. "He's given me the slip, dropped out entirely. It's a hard country, but I'll get him."

"Still offering that thousand dollars?"

The ranger's eyes narrowed on this man with the faint drawl. "Yes. Dead or alive. Want it?"

"Wanting it don't earn it. I don't know where he is, if that's what you mean."

"Then what . . . ?"

"I just heard somebody walk over his grave."

The ranger pulled his square jaw. "Think he's dead, do you?"

"What I think don't matter two-bits, Ranger man. How bad is he?"

For a long moment they eyed one another. Then: "We believed Curly Pickett one of our best men. He came here with Ranger Haggett and they did good work running down some mine thieves and recovering the gold. That night Haggett was murdered. The gold vanished. . . . Pickett with it."

"So that makes him guilty, eh?" The tall man's eyes grew frosty.

"I didn't say that. But Pickett did some drinking and got quarrelsome. He was heard to threaten Haggett."

"Curly liked his whiskey, Ranger, an' he ran off at the head when he got r'iled, but murder an' robbery wasn't in him. You say he threatened this Haggett; what about?"

"A dance-hall girl. Lala Zorrita, she called herself. They both were sweet on her, according to the evidence. She's gone, too. That makes a poor case for Pickett."

"Does for a fact, Ranger, but I'll never believe it. Him an' me, we were pards, ridin' stirrup to stirrup into Mexico with Doniphan. We went through Sacramento, Sierra de Victoriano, Chihuahua, with that tow-headed kid laughin' an' yellin', jokin' an' cussin', ridin' through the hell of gunfire to pick me up when my horse died under me, and pinned me down. No, Ranger man, that tow-headed pardner of mine is no thief, no murderer."

The ranger's eyes glowed. "I have only the evidence to go on."

"The evidence lies, Ranger, an' I'm here to prove it. Woman or no woman, no man can tell me Curly Pickett went crooked an' betrayed a solemn trust."

"I hope you're not disappointed, my friend."

The lawman got up, his ears cocked to the grind of the stage coach drawing up outside. He stuck out a strong, long-fingered hand.

"Luck to you, Mister . . . ?"

"Deverell—Doug Deverell. I was at Jamestown."

"Marshall Deverell?" The ranger's interest sharpened. "The man who wiped out the Lopez gang! I'm happy to meet you, Deverell.

You savvy how to dispense the medicine needed by a country that's sick. I must return briefly to Sacramento. Say the word man, when I come back here I'll fetch your commission in the rangers."

Doug Deverell grinned. "Fetch it along, Ranger, though you may never have a chance to pin it on. That curly-headed son-of-a-gun was a fighting fool. If they got him, the chances are they'll get me too, but not before it costs 'em plenty. If Curly's alive an' guilty, I'll fetch him back. If he's dead, I'll do what I can to pay off his bill."

"Inside a week I'll be back here with the strength to do something, Deverell. If you get in a tight place, call on me."

"Thanks, Ranger. But I like to play it lone-wolf. See you after the smoke settles—I hope."

"Luck to you, Deverell. And good-bye till I get back."

Doug watched him stride from the saloon, a wiry, broad-shouldered giant. And his going was not without its effect upon this tall Texan who had ridden with Doniphan. It was as if strength had been withdrawn from him, some badly needed moral force, much as when he had parted from Curly Pickett, after the mustering out in Santone. Now, truly, he was a lone wolf, with his nose to a bitter trail. At the far end of that trail was Curly Pickett, either reveling with his loot and his dance-hall girl, or dead in a grave of treachery. . . .

THAT trail led Doug Deverell from Downieville, across tumbled mountains by seldom-used byways and so to Angel City—a mining town backed by leprous gray hills, overlooking the bleak Tuhikuk Sink. Here, hacked into these friendless hills, was the Black Angel Silver Mine, where hundreds of Washoes, Shoshones and Paiutes mucked the low-grade ore and packed in oak wood to roast and smelt it in a Mexican type *fundidor*.

The Black Angel was no bonanza. According to mining men who had visited the property, only dirt-cheap Indian labor made it a going concern. Yet the diggings did support Angel City, and in traditional boom-camp style.

Far off established routes of travel, Angel City attracted few travelers. Because of the unmarked California east border, it was not definitely known whether the camp lay in California or in Nevada—a point that drew tax-hungry officials from two vast, poorly populated counties, one in the state, one in the territory. Their demands for taxes were never met, though they did receive an unmatched hospitality at the hub of Angel City activity, the saloon and gambling palace called whimsically, Angel's Roost.

The owner of the Roost, founder of the

town and dictator of its destiny, was a power in the Washoe. And an enigma, as well. He went by the name of Black Arch Angel, which some claimed was not his name. His background was a mystery. His command was something to be obeyed—quickly.

Black Arch was a striking figure, tall, fifty, strongly built and bronzed by the sun. He dressed in the latest mode, always in perfect taste. His front teeth were of gold and he showed them constantly. He smiled, even when his smoke-gray eyes froze ice. Handsome, impeccable, charming to women and held in awe by most men, Black Arch was a standout in any company.

If he was fascinating in calmer moments, he was a bad man to cross, as many had found to their sorrow. He dominated his town and mine with strong, sudden decisions, ruthless orders, strict discipline. He asked no odds, granted none. His mule trains, crossing the Sierras with silver for China, went significantly unmolested. Enemies had tried to liquidate him. These, unfortunately for themselves, had failed to get past Black Arch's bodyguard, a rotund gun-streak known only as The Cherub.

It was The Cherub who came now to Doug Deverell's elbow, when he belied up to the bar in the Angel's Roost and ordered whiskey. He was inches shorter than Doug, yet there was a solidness about him, a menace that belied his smiling chubbiness.

"This," he said pointedly, "is a high-class place."

Doug noted the barkeep's hesitation and smiled coldly. He was dust powdered and he needed a shave. His eyes ran over the patronage, noted Black Arch and a party of well-dressed friends. He took stock of men and women bucking the games, and the under-dressed percentage girls. Beside these, he stacked up pretty bad.

The place was well appointed. Built of quarried stone showing streaks of mineral, its flagged floor was spread with colorful Indian rugs and its walls hung with all manner of Indian handicraft. There was an air of refinement here, reflecting the artistic taste of its owner.

"So I see," said Doug, pleasantly. "Real nice."

"Bums are not welcome here, mister."

"Bums are not welcome anywhere," agreed Doug.

"I'm glad you get my point, friend. Yonder's the front door."

"What about that whiskey, bartender?" said Doug. "And for your information, Cherub, dust and sweat and lack of a razor doesn't make a bum. Hurry up; I'm thirsty."

The cherubic smile faded and the round face contorted. "Out you go," barked the Cherub, and he grabbed for Doug's collar and the seat

of his pants. But his victim was a bit too long coupled. Doug twisted from his grasp and stepped back. The Cherub hurtled at him, swinging a wicked blow at Doug's jaw. Doug sidestepped neatly and knocked him down with a chopping right to the back of the neck.

The Cherub lit on his face and rolled to his back. Dazedly, he reached for the fancy gun that had killed so many men. Doug stooped, caught it from his nerveless hand and swung to face the crowd. The games had ceased and the patrons stared. But nobody made a hostile move. Eyes swiveled then to Black Arch.

The Washoe dictator was smiling a gold-toothed smile. "Cherub's mistake, stranger," he chuckled. "Maybe you'll do me the honor of drinking with me privately."

Taking acceptance for granted, he went back to an office in the rear. Doug tossed the empty weapon at the rousing Cherub, followed Angel and found himself in a finely appointed den. Black Arch dropped into a swivel chair, behind a massive desk, waved Doug to a chair and fixed him with a gold-toothed smile. "Not everybody can handle the Cherub like that, stranger. His pride will be touched, but I'll talk sense into him. What's your name?"

"Name?" Doug matched that reptilian stare. "Oh-h-h, call me Doug."

A waiter fetched drinks and food and Doug, being hungry, tied into them. While he ate, he admired the guns on the walls. Black Arch smiled. "Like guns, Doug?"

"They're about all I've known since I cut my teeth on one."

"Hmmm, use them well, do you?"

"Tolerable. I've practiced on bear an' buffalo. . . . An' men, under Captain Jack Hays, of the Texas Rangers. I served under Doniphan in '47. Yep, I know guns."

Angel's ebony eyes narrowed to points. "What have you been doing since '47?"

"Digging for gold, mostly in the wrong places. There's easier money."

"You said it." Black Arch eyed Doug over pressed fingertips. "I have use for a man like you. Suppose you get bathed, barbered and new clothes, then work for me."

Doug grinned. "Sounds elegant, but I'll quit fast if I don't like it."

"You'll like it," smiled the boss. "All right; it's settled. Outfit at the company store—my expense. Frank will pretty you at the Metropole Barber Shop. Room and board at the Washoe House. Headquarter here till I get ready to send you out to Manysprings Ranch. And remember—" the golden teeth gleamed—"this is my scope of country. Play to my leads, and your luck won't sour."

Doug went into the barroom, where the bartender was lighting lamps in heavy crystal chandeliers. The Cherub, waiting at the bar, intercepted him. His hand was out and his

smile contrite. "My mistake, friend. I had it coming."

Doug winced at the power in those pudgy fingers. The gesture was nice but it was belied by glints in the Cherub's deceptively-mild blue eyes, fires fed by jealousy and smoldering pride.

CHAPTER TWO

Murder's Side-kick

DOUg, all duded up, returned to the crowded Roost to find the bar lined, the games busy. Black Arch, watching his take with satisfaction, flung Doug a grin of approval. The Cherub looked Doug up and down with sneering interest.

Bored by the gambling, Doug lazed back to an empty booth in the dancing wing, where fiddle and accordion set a gay beat. A painted blonde came over. "Lonesome, big fellow? Buy a drink and I'll see what can be done?"

Doug shook her off. "Thanks, sister! I'm particular. Where's Lala?"

"Lala Zorrita?" Her fixed smile faded, leaving her face pasty and hard. "How the hell would I know?" She flung away and Doug settled, dividing his attention between dance hall and barroom. Thus he was first to see a man enter whom he had never expected to see again—a bandy-legged oldster, pint-sized, fiercely mustached, double-gunned.

Fascinated, Doug watched this newcomer down a drink, visit with Black Arch a minute and wheel his rowels to the dance hall and a girl.

Doug smiled. At sixty-odd, Sandhill Sims was still a judge of feminine beauty. The musicians struck up a lively tune, and Sandhill swung his partner. Doug, shrinking back into the booth, saw the girl suddenly pale as Sandhill passed her a note.

After the dance, with Sandhill bowlegging to the bar, the girl caught Doug's beckoning gesture, scowled but came over to his table. She was beautiful, her long black gown hanging from full, white shoulders, her oval face unmarred by dissipation. Her lips were too tightly pressed—a hint that her hazel eyes were weary of the tawdry, tinsel life. Doug said: "Go ahead, lady. Read your note here."

She was startled, but did just that, paling at the message. "Oh, dear!" she gasped. Then she chewed the note to a pulp and dropped it. Doug thought her faintness an act till she murmured: "Poor Lala!"

It was Doug's turn to start. "Pity for La Zorrita, lady?"

"Why not? She's dying—a girl dragged into crime by a man she loved, but didn't know well enough. She's the best friend I ever had."

Then abruptly her hardness cracked. "Oh, I must tell someone. I was a singer in a Frisco show. We toured the mining camps and the manager left us stranded in Downieville. Lala was dancing in the Vendome and got me a job. We were like sisters till she met Curly Pickett, the ranger. He killed another ranger and ran off with stolen money they'd recovered. He took Lala with him. Hearing she was in trouble in Angel City, I came here, but—but nobody could help her."

She glanced nervously around. "I must sing in ten minutes. If we could meet somewhere. . . ."

Doug slid her a bill. "For you, sister. An' I'll buy drinks to pour out till it's time for you to sing. Now, what about Lala?"

She gasped. "This—this is a gold note, mister! A hundred!"

"Use it to quit a game you're too good for, kid."

Her eyes misted. "Honest, handsome, you don't know what this means! A ticket home to Missouri and the folks." She choked up a little. "And Angel won't stop me, either. Old Sandhill Sims will get me to the stage, real soon. Yes, I think I'll kiss you."

Doug grinned. "It's worth another century, lady, but before the kiss, what about Lala?"

"You—you were sweet on her?"

"Never saw her in my life."

"I'm glad—for you. A circuit rider married Lala to that renegade ranger in the Washoe House. I attended Lala. The ranger had no friend to be best man."

"You make a bad case for Pickett, ma'am. What happened? Why's Lala dying?"

"She's about to die at Angel's Manysprings Ranch. She wrote for me to burn two candles—one for her and one for Curly."

"You mean Black Arch Angel's killing them? Why?"

"I'm no good at riddles, handsome. Queer things take place around here. Maybe Curly wouldn't split the loot right with Angel. Or maybe he and Lala know too much to be running around loose."

Doug said: "That split business is out, lady. Between you an' me, Curly Pickett's my old side-pardner in the Texas Rangers. Curly didn't murder any ranger, nor steal any gold. I'm here to find him an' whoever ran this sandy on him had better hunt a hole an' pull it in after him."

Her eyes were shining. "My old friend, Sandhill, works at Manysprings. Between us, we can help. All I said about Curly was hearsay, and probably wrong. Lala, my best friend, is in trouble, and I'd die to save her. What's your name?"

"Doug should bring me, ma'am. Yours?"

"Vonnie."

She was smiling now, her eyes like desert

greasewood after a shower. Emotion struck a sultry note in her voice. "I—I like you, Doug, honest. And I'm glad we'll be partners in this." She stood up, and started for the small stage, but Doug, moved by sudden fear, pulled her down. His hand was near his gun as a man slid from the adjoining booth and hurried toward the bar. Vonnie paled.

"Ratter Carse," she whispered. "Black Arch's stool-pigeon. If he heard us, Doug, we're in bad trouble. I—I don't matter, but you must get away. Quick!"

"You, too, Vonnie. Fetch whatever you want to take an' meet me at the Angel City stable in five minutes. Hurry!"

Impulsively she kissed him, then moved toward the dressing room. Stiff faced, Doug hitched his gun and entered the barroom.

Black Arch, puffing a black cigar, expostulated with a gross man in a silk hat. Behind him, the Cherub restrained the eager Ratter, who insisted his business was for Angel's ears only. Doug found the bandy-legged old-timer at the bar. "How's crime, Sandhill?"

"Habits die hard, son. Two-three Californy towns have the hex on me an' the's bounty on my hide in Washoe City. It's bin cozy snugglin' under the Angel's wing. What you doin' here? An' what's up?"

"Vonnice told me about Curly bein' at Manysprings. Know him?"

"Curly Pickett, that stubborn tow-headed Texican? Instead uh talkin' soft an' salvin' Black Arch, he cussed him out an' got tagged for a three-by-six. An' his spunky wife with him."

"He's tagging Vonnie an' me for the same, the Ratter havin' overheard us talkin'. Can you steer us to Manysprings, Sandhill?"

"That's stickin' yore neck into the jaws, younker. What you aim to do?"

"Free Curly. He saved my life in Mexico. I gotta save him."

"Son. You can't buck that deal alone."

"You're helpin', Sandhill. Mind when I rescued you from them captured Mex outlaws, only me knowin' you led 'em? Remember how I augered you was worth more to guide the

WASTE PAPER IS A WEAPON OF WAR

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SAVE IT . . . SORT IT . . . CALL YOUR COLLECTOR

The oldster's head swiveled. His jaw went slack. "Fry me fer a oyster," he gasped. "If it ain't Doug Dev. . . ." But Doug silenced him.

"Angel City Stable," he said softly. "Quick!" And he hurried from the Roost.

SSANDHILL entered the barn and embraced Doug. "You young badger! I'm as glad . . ."

"Sandhill, you old hellion! Heard you was buried in a Goliad grave."

"Would be, younker, if Santa Anna'd thought about diggin'. Me, I augered ag'in, surrender, but Fannin did, an' they shot us, by fifties."

"I know, Sandhill; Dad died there. But—how'd you escape?"

Sandhill snorted. "As they fired I pitched down, unhurt. Mex soldiers bayonet the fallen, pinkin' me through the shoulder. Looters rob us dead 'uns, then a Mex woman helps me to the river an' a hawss. Was stove up awhile, but at San Jacinto I try to half pay for my one friend—yore ol' man, Doug."

Doug said: "Still listen for the owl hoot, Sandhill?"

Rangers than you was rottin' in the Candelaria jail. An' the time I—"

"Whoa, kid, yo're bustin' my heart!" Sandhill sloshed a drink, popping the bottle in his pocket when Doug refused. "Lissen, Manysprings ain't nothin' but a fort, an arsenal, under renegade Captain Enoch Agee. Come more guns an' ammunition an' real war'll bust outa the Washoe like a hurricane!"

"War? How come, Sandhill?"

"Invasion of Californy. A column marchin' into every rich camp, scourin' the Sierras for gold. They'll bust open every bank, safe an' express office on the Mother Lode, loot the till of every store an' saloon, pick every pocket. Should net ten million, at the very least."

"That's crazy, Sandhill. You know they can't get away with that. It's the same as civil war. The government will send in enough soldiers to—"

"Time the soldiers get here, the job will be done. Black Arch an' his army will board a ship on the coast an' sail with the loot to the Sandwich Islands, or China, or somewhere too far for any army to touch 'em. Nope, it's iron-clad, son, an'—who's this?"

Running footsteps sounded at the entrance. A harried voice called, "Doug! Doug!"

"Vonnie!" Doug stepped out of the empty stall.

From a poorly lighted cubby at the front came a bearded hostler. "Hey, what goes on here? Who is it?" The man came striding through the gloom.

Sandhill stepped out to meet him. "It's me, Gopher—Sims. I'm ridin' out."

The hostler planted himself, listening to the confusion welling from the Angel's Roost. "You, eh? Then who was that runnin'? Who's with you?"

Doug, moving with swift strides to meet the girl, gathered her into his arms, felt her shudder. "Quick, Doug. They're coming!"

Doug said: "Steady pardner. This way." He led her back to where his horse was stalled.

Behind them was the old outlaw's humorous chuckle.

"Now, Gopher, you wouldn't stick yore nose into a man's innercent love affairs, would you." The dull, meaty smack of iron against flesh and bone. A groan, and clump of a body against the earth. Then Sandhill's voice: "Sleep it off, Gopher. Time you get around to stoolin' on me, Black Arch won't be interested."

He came leaping to the rear, the roar of the manhunt swelling through the night. Doug had bridled the horse stalled next to his own, jerked the cinch and boosted Vonnie into the saddle. Her "Hurry, hurry!" made his fingers all thumbs, as the blood-cry drew near and time ran out. He got rigged and swung up, reining into the aisle between stalls as Sandhill came plunging out on his pony.

"Bile me in bull gravy!" yelled the oldster. "They're plumb on top of us! Come on!"

They poured out the back, the ponies under free rein, as the Angel men came surging in the front. Bullets hummed after them, missing as they swept into the alley. The town was in a turmoil as they pounded past the rear of the business buildings. A man materialized before them; a gun blazed directly in their path. Sandhill, yelling like a Comanche, rode the man down and they plunged on, clearing the outskirts on the run and sweeping into the east road at a long lope.

Sandhill rode in the lead, his heels busy as he called upon his horse for all it had. Dust rose in a cloud, fogging the road behind them. And now, through that pall of dust, struck the murmur of pursuit.

Doug held his pony to the gait of the one ridden by the girl. "You're no new hand on a horse, Vonnie," he said admiringly.

"I was born and raised on a Missouri farm, Doug. I'll stay with you."

"Timber up ahead," he shouted. "When we

hit it, you'll be easing my mind if you slip away, cut back an' hit for Downieville. Keep a lookout for a California Ranger; hell, I didn't even ask his name. Tell him what's up an' send him out here. Will you do that?"

Her hand came out to find his. "I hate to quit you, Doug," she called huskily. "But I guess I'll only cramp your style. I—I wish I could tell you what this means to me."

"Tell me when I get to Downieville, Vonnie. An' I'll tell you what it means to me, girl." He handed her a roll of currency. "Wait there for me. This should see you through. If I come through this hide-whole, I'm going to ask you a mighty important question, Vonnie."

A strong pressure ran down her fingers. "I'll wait for you. . . ."

Sandhill dropped back. "You two'd rather lollygag than ride, seems like. Them buzzards is gainin', an' we'll have to discourage 'em some. Road pitches over a rim directly. We'll wait for 'em there."

They thundered that mile, with pursuit nearing by the minute. Where the road cut left at the rim and tipped down the grade, Sandhill curbed and made a running dismount, jerking his saddle gun free. Doug and Vonnie reined to a halt.

Doug said: "Follow the creek timber, honey, for a mile or two and then circle around Angel City. You should be in Downieville before morning." He put his hands on her cheeks and drew her lips to his.

"God look after you, Doug," she whispered, and sent her pony racing down the slope. Doug jerked his carbine and, with the rein looped about his arm, took his place beside Sandhill, his eyes just clearing the rim.

There, like evil spirits of the night, a dozen riders came thundering toward them, their guns glittering in the starlight.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood-Strike at Manysprings

THE fight at the rim was less a fight than a slaughter. Sandhill yelled: "Now, younker!" and dropped the hammer of his piece. The Angel cavalcade, closely bunched, was hardly a hundred feet away. Doug took quick aim and fired. A rider screamed as he went back over his animal's tail. A horse swallowed its hoofs and somersaulted, its rider arcing to a hard fall and being ridden over by the others.

A quick and violent curbing. Curses, shouts and gun-flashes in the night, as bullets snarled around the pair sheltered by the rim. Sandhill shot again and another rider died. Doug reloaded and brought down another man. Black Arch's men scattered, then made a

charge as they were lashed out of their surprise by the flat, bitter shouts of the Cherub. Darkness blocked out the sights but it was too close work to miss. If Sandhill missed a shot, Doug failed to notice it. Doug loaded, fired and loaded again.

The attackers got close. Horses crashed and men cried as they died. Survivors—and there were no more than six—withdrew from that charge, halting beyond gunshot. And Doug could hear the low murmur of their voices as they talked it over. Then came the soft beat of their horses' hoofs, growing fainter until the night swallowed them.

Sandhill grunted a long breath. "They've got enough for now son. But Black Arch Angel will get word to the ranch to scour the woods for us. Let's go."

Doug said: "I didn't aim to get you into trouble with this mob, Sandhill. If there's any way you can cover up, take it. Show me the ranch; that's all I ask."

The oldest chuckled. "An' leave you to play a lone hand? Hell, no! This is my horn-in, as well as yores. It's you an' me, an' the boys that follered me before we all throwed in with Black Arch. We was tipped off that Angel was figgerin' to lump us with the column to be sent into the southern gold camps. At the proper moment, our take was to be sent to some secret place by wagons, an' we was to be left holdin' the bag, like the tenderfoot on a snipe hunt. We pulled out. This was to be our last day in what Black Arch calls his Angel Host. Reckon the boys will be glad to serve one more day. Le's ride."

They rose to their saddles and dropped into a flat bottomland pungent with the smell of water growth. The way led through crowding willows and suddenly the starlight showed a rider before them. Sandhill whipped out his pistol. "Who's that?"

"Sandhill!" It was Vonnice. "Doug!"

They pulled down beside her and the girl came to Doug. "I was ashamed to ride off and leave you like this," she said, half tearfully. "There will be trouble at the ranch. You'll need all the help you can get. Give me a gun; I can use it as well as any man."

"How tough will this be, Sandhill?" Doug asked.

"Plenty," growled the old outlaw. "Too salty fer a gal. But the's no augerin' with the critters; fetch her along."

Some miles farther on, Sandhill reined left through a rift in the willows and entered a gap, his shrill whistle bringing instant answer from big cottonwoods where men were running from picketed horses. Now more than a score of heavily-armed, well-mounted men were ready to ride.

"What's the rip, Chief?"

"We're cuttin' string, boys, takin' the Angel arsenal apart. Treasury an' barroom are yores fer the lootin'."

They answered with wild yells—uncurried men knowing no will but to loot, no curb save force. Hoof-echoes bounded from the headlands, and dust rolled in a cloud toward Manysprings Ranch.

AT MANYSPRINGS the stockade drowed beneath the stars. Formed by the backs of contiguous adobes, this square fortress lay in lush meadowland, destined one day to become the finest stock ranch in Nevada. Sandhill rode bodily to the gate, herding Doug and Vonnice, their hands loosely roped behind their backs.

"Who's that?" A gun muzzle jutted from a gate loop.

"It's Sims. More prisoners from Angel—another ranger an' his woman."

The gate swung and they rode inside. From huts fronting the adobes, Indian renegades came to stare. Horses whinnied from a corral at the far end. Evil was a strong impact against Doug's nerves as he obeyed Sandhill's shouted order to make for the one lighted adobe.

Doug dismounted at the door. Sandhill handed Vonnice down. From within came tipsy men who deserted a table littered with cards, chips and bottles. Doug and Vonnice moved past these, entered a room dominated by a lone occupant, a cadaverous and frowning man.

The man wore a disreputable cavalry uniform, tunic open at the throat, faded blue pants tucked into high boots. Two guns swung at his hips. This was Captain Enoch Agee—renegade commander of the rag-tag army that strained at the leash before its invasion of the California gold fields. His voice was deeply sepulchral. "What does this mean? What is this, Sims?"

"Prisoners, Cap'n, from Black Arch. A ranger, an'—" he slammed the door shut. When the captain protested he wanted the room aired, Sandhill said: "Time fer that after we coop these turkeys, Cap'n. Black Arch is scairt yore men'll want to hang this pair when they know how plumb guilty they are."

"Guilty of what?"

"Me an' my men captured 'em, Cap'n, an' tied 'em up like you see. Somehow they shucked the ropes an' come up with guns. . . . Like this!"

The signal! Loose ropes fell from the prisoner's wrists. Their hands flashed, gun-filled. Sandhill lined his revolver on the captain's belly. "This is it, Agee! A backfire for yore plan to slaughter-house me an' my boys. Gimme yore keys!"

"You damned fool!" snapped the captain,

reaching for his right hand gun and leaping at Doug, swinging with his left. He splattered Doug's nose, filling his eyes with blood and pain, momentarily blinding him.

Doug swung his gun, knowing that to fire was to bring down a cloudburst of renegades. He missed. Vonnie, grimly silent, smashed at Agee's lowered head, brushed his hair. Agee's gun was swinging up for a shot when Sandhill's gunsight dented his skull, smashing him to the floor.

"Now!" rapped Sandhill, stooping for the captain's keys and flipping back a worn Indian blanket to reveal a padlocked trap door. It opened with a squeal of hinges. Sandhill barked: "Come up, you mule-eared Texican, an' learn what real trouble is!"

Blinking from a protracted stay underground, a man and a woman came to the light. There was little glamor about Lala Zorrita now. Her inky hair was awry, her eyes darkly circled with worry, and a smudge of dirt stained one cheek. She blinked, gave a cry of joy and tottered toward Vonnie. The two girls embraced, sobbing.

Curly, his fighting grin frozen, planted himself, ready for the worst. Then, as his vision cleared and he saw Doug, "I thought. . . ." he said shakily, then laughed and leaped for the hand of his old side-partner. "Mighta knowed you'd pop into the picture, you long-horned Texas warhog! You're—" He broke off, staring at the writhing captain. "Parted his hair, eh? Let him up; I've got what he's had comin' this long time!"

Doug restrained his stocky, square-jawed friend, whose tawny hair stood out at all angles. "You'll get what fightin' you want, old son. We ain't out of this yet—not by a long ways!"

Without any warning, Captain Agee sat up, his hollow cry ripping the stillness. "Help! They got me foul! Rush 'em!"

Impelled by long-frustrated hate, Curly Pickett caught him off the floor, smashed him unconscious with a looping blow.

But the harm was done. The renegades were roused, roaring to Agee's aid. . . .

SSANDHILL blew the light. Curly appropriated the captain's pistols as Doug got the girls onto the floor. Three renegades hit the door and barged through. There was a quick, sharp fight. The defenders had their foes silhouetted against the starlight, and they clubbed them down. The renegades had rifles in their hands, pistols in their holsters and cartridges slung in heavy bandoliers about their shoulders. These were stripped off, the unconscious men rolled outside and the door barred.

The compound was seething now with tipsy and sleep-drugged warriors, both red and

white. A babel of uplifted voices. A thunderous bellow demanded that Sandhill surrender. And the man got his answer from that salty old goat, with profane trimmings.

A gun blared and a bullet screamed off the sun-baked adobe wall. Bullets ripped through the oiled skin panes, chunking into the back wall. From the sills, Doug and Curly and Sandhill gave it back, firing at the flashes. Their accuracy took steady toll and panic touched the renegades. They scattered, running for cover, crowding one another, bumping and stumbling. It was one place where the odds were not with the great numbers.

All attention was directed away from the gate until the guard there suddenly screamed, fired his gun and turned to run. He fell with a dozen slugs in his body. And through that gate came Sandhill's howling, shooting outlaws from the hills.

The surprised legionaries of Black Arch Angel, caught between two fires and with little stomach for this night fight against unknown odds, split into two groups—those who would fight and those who wouldn't. These last, and they included all the Washoes who believed the evil spirits of the night dogged him who battled in the darkness—bolted for the horses or ran madly out the gate.

The first group tried to rally, but they were being cut into small bands by the hard-riding outlaws. Fighting was savage, bloody, hand-to-hand. Old scores were being written off in blood out there with lead and steel. Blood stained the packed earth.

For those in the captain's quarters, there was no shooting. Friend and foe were indistinguishable in that maelstrom of battle. But slowly it was becoming clear to the Angel's mercenaries that their attackers were in small number. It gave them heart and slowly, bitterly, they forced the battling outlaws toward one corner.

"Got to hit 'em from behind, boys," said Old Sandhill, and he lifted the bar. "These keys'll let us into the armory. Couple uh little cannon there should do the trick. Come on." "Bar the door after us, honey," Curly told Lala. "An' shoot any skunk that tries to get in. Here, take this gun."

Vonnie found Doug's side and gripped his arm. "Take care of yourself, handsome. I'd kill somebody tonight to keep you unharmed."

"Right back at you, Vonnie. Keep low, and watch those windows."

He darted out behind Sandhill and Curly. Following the deeper shadows, they ghosted to the armory. Now a hoarse challenge rose before them. They wore spurs and the jingling had betrayed them. They halted, ducking as a gun blared from the armory door. Three pistols cracked and the guard grunted, reeled toward them and fell, almost at their feet.

CHAPTER FOUR

Outlaw Rebellion

Doug pitied the poor devil, slain defending his post, but it was a poor time for sentiment. The shots had warned the renegades of the threat to the armory and they were coming. Sandhill got the key in the lock and swung the door wide.

"Keep that door clear while I git one uh them cannon," he ordered, and fumbled his way back into the blackness.

Some of Black Arch's hirelings approached the armory and Doug and Curly scattered them with a flurry of shots. Others gathered, sending their bullets through the doorway, behind the jambs of which Doug and Curly enjoyed safety of a sort. Urgency gripped Black Arch's soldiers, affording the hard-pressed outlaws a badly needed diversion. With the armory in enemy hands, the Angel cause was lost and the renegades realized it, massed for the attack.

Sandhill came dragging the small cannon, swung it around and lined it. With a sky-shaking yell, the renegades charged. By the light of his muzzle flares, Doug's grin was a ghastly grimace. Curly cursed as he shot. Sandhill nursed a sulphur match, set a fuse to sizzling. "Let them fightin' snakes start prayin'," he yelled. "Ol' Betsy's loaded to the eyes with buck. Hell, swing yore gates wide!"

The cannon went off with a vast thunder, and flopped over backward. Out of its deafening echoes came screams of pain, groans and blasphemy, sounds of a hasty scattering. And Sandhill's outlaws were resuming the offensive against a demoralized enemy. A howl lifted to heaven and scores of voices took it up.

Sandhill leaped into the air, cracking his heels together.

"Bake me fer a stuffed mallet duck, boys, Black Arch's soldiers is licked."

And they were. The swift, desperate fight was over. A handful of desperately reckless outlaws had defeated an invasion army that had planned to run rampant over the diggings along the Mother Lode.

Conscienceless outlaws, inflamed by victory, were calling for ropes and a hanging corpses at every rafter. "The damned fools is gone loco," rapped Sandhill, and dashed out to get his men under control. Doug didn't follow him.

Nor did Curly.

"You hear something like a scream?" asked Curly.

"You taken the words right outa my mouth," rapped Doug. "Come on!"

The door to Captain Agee's quarters was open. The girls, half conscious, lay writhing on the floor. Enoch Agee was gone, after bashing the two girls' heads together, taking the pistols, and losing himself in the vast confusion of the battle.

DOUG lifted Vonnie from the floor while Curly made a light. The singer was coming around, but there was a dazed look in her eyes. Doug gave her a drink from one of the bottles on the table. She shuddered, drew a long breath and laughed shakily.

"Fine mess we made, honey. Agee recovered, knocked us around and took our guns. He'll bring more men from Angel City, and . . ." Then she moved to comfort Lala who, already overstrained, wept bitterly. "Don't cry, honey. Curly, get your arms around your bride and comfort her."

But Curly was listening. "Sandhill's in trouble, Doug. It's our move."

They hurried out, guns palmed. In the courtyard, before scores of cowed renegades, Sandhill faced his men. ". . . an' I say," he shrilled, "you don't shame yore skin with no such hangin' circus. You won yore fight; what more you want?"

"You aimin' to turn the mangy coyotes loose, Sandhill?" demanded a lank, slit-eyed spokesman. "To rampage through the Californy mines?"

"That's no skin off you, Highpockets. Who cares what they do?"

"They killed some of our side-pardners. They'll hang for it, by God, even if—"

"—if what, Highpockets?" Sandhill cracked. "What makes you think you're roddin' this outfit . . . ?"

"This," barked Highpockets, and his gun came flashing to his hand.

Sandhill settled, slapping leather. Fire slashed across his holster lip. Highpockets stiffened, sagged and fell. Doug and Curly came up to side Sandhill, who smiled icily. "Anybody hone to play a dead man's cards?"

Nobody spoke. Nobody moved when the rebels, taking advantage of the quarrel, broke for the gate at a run-bawl. When they were gone, Sandhill said: "Good riddance. Wouldn't leave you slaughter 'em like we was Injuns, an' we want no prisoners. Now likker up an' divide what money you can find."

With no enthusiasm, they moved sullenly to the barroom for whisky looted on the Overland Trail. Sandhill sighed, suddenly looking tired and very old. "My last gun-fight, younkers. Too slow. Once I'd uh nailed him before he drewed." His eyes closed and he fell limply. Doug knelt, found the belly wound. He rose, grim and gray.

"Take his feet, Curly. Looks like finish for a pioneer who done plenty to put the Lone Star on Ol' Glory." Tenderly they carried him inside, the outlaws watching, offering nothing. Curly shredded a blanket. Doug

whipped tight bandages about Sandhill's middle. Through it all, Lala wept silently.

"Sandhill's only chance," Doug decreed, "is the Angel City medico. Saddle two horses, Curly, an' take him in, fast!"

"If I show my face there," said Curly bitterly, "I get a ticket to hell."

"No, Curly. Agee will bring Black Arch and more men. Avoid the trail. Cut west an' hit town from the north. You'll miss them. I'll bring the girls."

Curly grumbled but could not deny this slim chance to Doug. Together they mounted the unconscious oldster, roped him in the saddle. Curly took a whisky bottle against Sandhill's possible need, kissed his wife and rode past the sprawled dead, out the gate.

Now Doug left the girls and went to the armory where he arranged munitions stored against the day of invasion. When he emerged, he was laying a train of cannon powder, pouring from a keg. This open fuse half ringed the enclosure to Agee's quarters. The outlaws watched, drunk, recklessly critical, dangerous.

"Aim to blow the armory, eh?" asked a bull-necked, black-whiskered man.

"How'd you guess?" asked Doug.

"No dice, feller. That stuff's worth thousands uh dollars. We fought fer it, an' it's ours." A mutter of concurrence ran through outlaw ranks.

Doug dropped the empty keg, facing them. "Agee escaped," he snapped. "Soon Black Arch's men will roar down to finish us. You want to be foolin' with guns an' powder an' cartridges when they light on you?"

Bull-neck scoffed. "That outfit's licked. You're lyin'!"

Doug's fist flashed, exploded against the man's chin. He upended, hit the earth on his neck, rolled over and lay still. Doug's lips made a snarling grin. If ever they saw a killer, ready to kill or be killed, it was Doug Deverell.

"According to Sandhill," he said, "you boys are no pack of fools: You can co-operate or you can fight. What's wrong with you? Somebody talk up."

"Sandhill promised we'd have the treasury," piped one. "We've looked everywhere, but no money. Where've you hid it?"

Doug reasoned with them. They were welcome to anything here they could carry, but he couldn't manufacture money. They disbelieved him; he could read it in their eyes. One drew out a big nickel watch. "You got one hour, feller, to tell us where it's hid or to admit you sent it out with Sandhill, that he was fakin' bein' shot. It's now seven. At eight you'll either put up, or be strung up!"

They withdrew to stand watch over the adobe. Doug went inside, deeply studious and

with little hope. Vonnie came to him. "The fools, Doug, the drunken fools! What can we do?"

"Maybe they're bluffing. If not, it's a case of take as many along as possible."

"I'll take my share, Doug."

Lala cried: "No! There must be no more bloodshed. There's a better way."

"What's that?" demanded Doug.

"Let's wait to see if they're bluffing."

They waited in silence, while the sun lifted higher. The stiffened bodies must be buried soon, and Doug found himself wondering how long that would be of concern to him. Eight o'clock came and went. The outlaws were quarreling down by the gate. The disagreement was finally settled and they scattered out. A call: "Do we get the money or do we take it out of yore hide, Deverell?"

"If I had gold or knew where it was," raged Doug, "I'd see you all in hell before you'd get an ounce!"

"That's all we want to know, Deverell. All right, boys, onto the roofs an' cut through to 'em from above. Le's go!"

"Wait!" Lala screamed, racing past Doug and out the door. Graceful as the dances she knew so well was her run across the compound. "Arch Angel is coming with more men. If I get you the gold, will you fight them off, keep them out of here?"

"She took the renegade treasury?" muttered Doug. "But how could she . . . ?"

"I don't know," whispered Vonnie. "Listen."

"We'll fight 'em an' glad of the chance," roared an outlaw spokesman. "Money or no money. But fer yore own good, you better not be runnin' a sandy, lady."

She joined them and to the two watchers in Agee's quarters the ensuing talk was unintelligible. Now there was a movement toward the gate, from which several men paced inward along the axis of the compound.

Someone brought a shovel and there was swift digging. Outlaw yells beat skyward as the shovel struck something unyielding. A strong wooden chest was drawn out, opened. Bronzed hands dipped in to take out small silver bars and golden nuggets.

Doug didn't reach for an answer to this mystery. There was much in this that only Lala could clear up. That chest showed rot; it had been long buried. He thought again of Agee—and the threat. He lifted his eyes. Yonder, where the hills dip into the Manysprings meadows, a dust bomb rolled toward the stockade.

Doug's high yell rang across the compound.

BATTLE again rolled toward Manysprings, but this time it was different. The outlaws, their avarice satisfied, fighting lust for-

tified by whiskey from the barroom, were warriors again, past differences forgotten, only their hate of Agee and Black Arch once more mattering.

Not one had protested Doug's leadership, nor his plan. The gate swung open. Save for the sprawled dead, the place seemed deserted as Captain Enoch Agee led a hundred picked men in from Angel City. There was nothing here to denote that Sandhill's outlaws were huddled in the Indian wickiups nearest the gate, that one of them held a string to set off a rifle aimed out the open armory door.

The Angel horde came with guns at ready, seeming to fill the silent compound with their power. They curbed abruptly, staring at the scene of death, getting the feel of the place.

"They're gone," raged Agee. "The murderous devils have run out!"

At that moment a rifle blared from the armory. Instinctively the troop ducked. "They're holding the armory!" yelled Agee. "Root 'em out!"

Men answered with a yell, swung from their horses, fanned out and charged the gun and ammunition storehouse, shooting through the open door as they ran. Reckless renegades, they saw their empire crumbling, and scorned death to save it, lashed on by Agee's bawled orders. Not a shot greeted them as they plunged into the gloomy, windowless room. More than a score of them plunged inside, firing blindly into the dark corners.

Quite unobserved, a man leaned from the doorway of Agee's office and dropped a lighted match into the powder trail Doug had laid. A faint line of smoke and flame traveling toward the armory, unnoticed in the pall of dust settling over the enclosure. More men crowding into the armory, puzzling over the roared intelligence that: "The' ain't nobody here . . . Nary a soul!"

FROM a small hill, a mile from the stockade, Doug Deverell watched the renegades enter the fortress unopposed. Below him, safely hidden in bottomland willows, Vonnie and Lala waited with three saddled horses.

With Captain Agee's telescope at his eye, Doug searched the renegade backtrail, located the two men watching from a far hill. He smiled coldly. Black Arch Angel and his shadow, the Cherub, were playing it safe—very safe. Doug pouched the glass as he ran down to join the girls.

"Wait here," he ordered, and mounted. "I'll be back directly." He lit out at a hard run, hidden from all eyes by the bottomland brush. . . .

From the distant hilltop, Black Arch watched his men take over Manysprings ranch. His ears were straining for sounds of

the battle that must reverse the temporary victory achieved by the treacherous outlaws who followed Sandhill Sims.

"What's the matter?" he demanded petulantly. "Not a sound from the stockade. The boys rode in without a fight. Reckon they've surrendered?"

The Cherub's laugh wasn't pretty. "More likely nobody there, Black. If you ask me, the bird has flown. Curly Pickett and the girl Lala. Sims, and his men. That feller you thought you were so smart hiring. Knots under our ears, Black—hang-knots!"

As he spoke, a puff of smoke spurted above the stockade—smoke writhing with roof timbers, with guns and powder cannisters, with the broken bodies of men. The earth shook under their feet. Across the lush flats rolled the dull thunder of a tremendous explosion, followed by the thin and savage yells of men and the crackle of small gun fire.

"God!" gasped Black Arch. "Blown up! Who, Cherub? Our men—or theirs?"

"What difference?" said the Cherub. "It's the armory, and the end of your grand dream. If you ask me, it's our men who went up in that blast. The survivors are being cut to pieces by Sims' tough hombres. You've made lots of mistakes, Black, and none so big as tying up with Sims, and in not killing that Deverell man. Well, it's our move, and fast."

He turned to their horses then halted abruptly. Deverell, a faint grin on his face, his hands empty, stood beside the animals. The Cherub, a born killer, stood glaring. Black Arch, sullen in the knowledge of defeat, was ugly and dangerous.

"Sit down an' we'll fight with words, gents," hummed Doug. "Or draw an' let hot lead settle it."

"What do you want, Ranger?" growled Black Arch.

"We'll make it words," decided the Cherub, always an opportunist. "Get it said."

Doug moved closer. "The war you aimed to lead out of the Washoe is ended, Angel, flickerin' out on the Manysprings ranch you stole from Lala's father after murderin' him in the gold country. Never thought the little gal you kicked out with her sick mother would regain that ranch an' write your finish, did you?"

Black Arch's golden smile broadened, but the hand that built the cigarette shook a little. "Talk some more, Deverell."

"You worked out a pretty slick frame for Curly Pickett, Angel, but you didn't figger the fightin' heart of that tow-headed Texan. You rang Ranger Quin Haggett into your crooked plan to loot the California gold fields, and killed him when his conscience wouldn't allow him to go through. Because a fine gal wouldn't be married under her assumed name,

you learned she was really Lola Gaspard, real owner of the place you stole. So you knew you'd have to kill both her an' Curly."

"Smart, ain't he, Black?" sneered the Cherub. "Shall I kill him?"

"You might pile that 'un, too, Cherub. But you can't win. You're busted—flat! By now the California Rangers have taken over Angel City. The word is out, an' every trail to the Coast is barred to you. Every station on the Overland Trail will be on the watch. You're blocked. The rats you left behind will squeal. You two will be wanted for every crime in the book. And the gallows waits."

"You won't live to see it, Deverell," snarled the Cherub.

"That's a question, boys. Any time you feel lucky, make your play. But losin' gets to be a habit. I don't want to kill you; I don't want to see you hung, for that'd mean draggin' Missus Pickett into court to mess around with a lot of painful memories. Here's your horses. Yonder lie the villages of the Indians you fooled into slavin' in your mines an' doin' your dirty work. Maybe they'll find a way of payin' you off; muckin' out their wickiups, mebby."

"To hell with that!" snapped the Cherub, and his hand was inching toward his gun. "I'll get you first an' take my chances. . . ."

"Touch that gun and I'll kill you, Cherub!" Black Arch was clutching at straws. "You and me, we're riding to our Indian friends, like he says. It should be a pleasant vacation, an' I haven't had one in years. If you want to stay and get hung, Cherub, I won't stand in your way. I think you'll come. . . ."

His golden smile shone like the sun. "Deverell, you're the only man ever to get the best of Black Arch Angel. My hat's off to you. But, the gods willing, we'll have another go when I get on my feet. I've got one regret—that I won't be able to dance at your wedding, Deverell. Vonnie Lovelace is the best woman I ever knew—and the prettiest. May your kids all be boys! Come on, Cherub."

Doug watched them narrowly as they mounted and rode down the hill, losing themselves in the brushlands stretching toward the Washoe villages. Doug stirred. "He could have been great at anything," he murmured. "Good plans, instead of bad, might have come true. . . . An' changed his world."

THE dead were long since gone from the stockade compound at Manysprings ranch. Bloodstains had dried and returned to the earth. The scars of battle were erased. There was music and laughter and wine from Cali-

fornia vineyards. And a solemn service in the little chapel, standing now on the site of the ruined armory.

Doug Deverell, with a golden badge of the California Rangers on his breast, knelt beside Vonnie Lovelace, very beautiful in her wedding dress, an inner joy shining through her eyes.

" . . . and those whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder . . . "

Behind Doug stood the great, tawny man who had slain Joaquin. Behind Vonnie was Lola Pickett, equally lovely in silk and lace, with her bouquet of lupin and paint-brush and wild iris. Curly stood with his arm about Sandhill Sims, a very white and very thin Sandhill who was mending slowly but surely. And crowding the chapel were the outlaw survivors of two Washoe battles, hailed as heroes now and finding peace for the restlessness in their souls in honest employment in Lola Pickett's reopened Black Angel Mine.

In time, the Black Angel petered out. Angel City perished and friends separated—something the world seems to demand of friends. Doug, fearless enemy of lawlessness, became the most celebrated sheriff in California, and his sons followed in their father's footsteps. Curly and his gracious wife built Manysprings into the fruitful dream of murdered Eloi Gaspard who had pre-empted it.

There, during the Virginia City heyday, they entertained mighty figures—bonanza kings Mackay, Fair, Flood and O'Brien; U. S. Senator Bill Sharon, king of the Comstock; Adolph Sutro, tunnel builder; Old Virginny; Bill Ralston, the banker; Lucky Baldwin and many others. Manysprings became a tradition.

Of Black Arch Angel, who might have been greater, richer, more powerful than any of these tycoons, nothing more was ever heard. But a curious party, poking around among the grisly relics, where the Washoe Indian rebellion was put down in a bloody eight-hour battle, found a bleaching skull with golden front teeth that seemed to smile at them as if relishing some sly joke.

An ethnologist, who identified the skull as Shoshonean and wrote at length upon this unique evidence of Indian vanity, found none to dispute him.

Doug alone knew the answer and he could have added much to the argument that raged around the causes of the Washoe uprising. But Doug was content to keep his silence and assume that dead dogs might be sleeping dogs.

THE END

Keep your eye on the Infantry
. . . . The doughboy does it!—Lt. Gen. L. J. McNair.

The sitting figure looked up and saw the standing one. . . .



LAWMAN'S GAMBLE

By VAN CORT

When two bounty-hunters start out after the same wanted man, somebody's sure to draw the losing ticket—punched for a blazing, non-stop ride to hell!

TOM GANNON did not look at all like the famous man-hunter he was on the morning he rode into Garrison. He was dressed in unobstructive gray and wearing a sand-colored shirt and a black shoestring tie. His trouser legs covered his boot shanks and he carried his pistol tucked away snugly in an armpit holster.

Hardly anyone saw him dismount from his trim bay horse at Tucker's stable, and after asking the hostler to give the animal a good swipe and a feed of oats, he walked down to the end of the street toward Coltrane's store.

Saloons are living bulletin boards, so he was certain that the man he was after would

not have gone into any of the three emporiums that the town sported. This man, Gannon judged, might have come up the alley from behind Coltrane's, since this was the end of town, and would have left his horse by trailing rein in the alley.

He would probably have bought a can of apricots, or peaches, and would have eaten them on the spot. He might have watered his horse, the strawberry roan—that giveaway, tell-tale strawberry roan—and have ridden out of town as quietly as he had come.

Gannon had reason to believe he had ridden through Garrison, though it lay near the state border and Russ Danver's home town, where

he had committed the murder, lay almost four hundred miles to the south. The marshal, by inquiring about with innocent carefulness, had learned that Russ Danver had visited Garri-son before.

Coltrane's store was long and deep. He saw that another customer, a tall, swarthy man in dusty riding clothes, was ahead of him at the counter, so he lingered at a display of bridles and rifles.

A young girl came out of the back room and faced the tall man inquiringly.

From the side, Gannon looked her over with quiet pleasure. She was not beautiful, but decidedly good-looking. The tall man seemed impressed too as he leaned his wide-shoulders over the counter. "A nice morning, isn't it?"

The girl said shortly, "Nice enough, I guess."

"Apricots," said the man then, after a few more futile attempts to strike up conversation. "I haven't had a good taste of apricots in a dog's age . . ."

Startled, Gannon was suddenly listening, his pulse quickening.

"We're out of them."

"Oh, well, peaches then."

The girl turned calmly to the shelf and took down a small can of peaches.

The man took out his pocket knife, cut the can open and began eating. "Very good peaches," he said, "almost as good as apricots . . ."

Apricots again!

"That's fifteen cents," said the girl. While she was getting his change the man went on: "A friend of mine's got a great hankering for apricots, too . . . young feller, not much over twenty-five; pretty good-looking, in a wild sort of way. . . He always goes for apricots; eats them right off out of the can like me now."

Gannon studied the man furtively. Word for word almost, those were the very remarks that he himself would have made to the girl. It was uncanny. Gannon cursed quietly. So he was not alone on Danver's trail!

"Oh," the girl said, still in that impersonal tone.

She was obviously trying to close the conversation; yet her taciturnity and curtness, Gannon decided, had a definite reason.

"This young feller, now, I was telling you about," pursued the stranger. "Pretty tall, dark-haired with sort of blue eyes. . . He usually rides a strawberry roan in a tooled Mexican saddle."

The girl was pointedly directing her attention to Gannon as the next customer. But the man took no hint. He went on: "I was thinking maybe he'd been through here. . . We were supposed to meet on some business. He has a scar under his left jawbone, and usually

packs a gun high on his left hip. Hair's dark and a little curly. . . . A good-looking, pleasant cuss."

THE girl was holding a yard stick on the counter and Gannon's keen eyes observed that her knuckles went white as she clutched it; but her voice remained low: "No, there hasn't been anybody through like that." She turned to Gannon then, "What can I do for you, mister?"

Gannon stepped up to the counter and quietly named a brand of tobacco while the tall, swarthy one began moving toward the door. "Hell, I guess I missed him. I thought maybe he'd come in here an' asked for apricots. . . ."

The girl gave the man a last look as she put Gannon's tobacco on the counter. "Nobody like that's been here at all," she said with sudden vehemence. Then she changed her tone immediately to one of utter casualness, "That is, of course, as far as I know."

The man went out and Gannon paid for his tobacco, studied the girl with heightened interest. "Talkative cuss," he said, gesturing after the tall one.

"Some people are."

"A feller can make a nuisance of himself that way some times," Gannon said. "Seems to me if he had an agreement to meet that hombre he was talking about he'd know where to find him."

She looked up at him sharply. "That was just what I was thinking."

After a few moments Gannon left. The girl had impressed him more than he wanted to admit; but he had to shake his head as he looked back at the store. He had hit Danver's trail, sure as anything. Luck was with him; but how she fitted into the picture bothered him sorely. He did not like the idea. And what of the swarthy stranger?

He walked down to the town's only hotel to have his breakfast. The stranger was loafing in the lobby. As Gannon entered he rose and greeted him. "Well, Tom Gannon, think we're having any luck?"

The marshal cursed under his breath. "I didn't get the name," he said curtly.

"Sanders; Gene Sanders; deputy marshal of Fox county." He flashed his badge.

The fugitive, Russ Danver, was wanted for killing an unarmed man in cold blood. The circumstances of the crime did not concern Gannon; his was merely the job of bringing in the man, not necessarily alive, for the desperate nature of Danver had been impressed upon him. A large bonus had been promised him and, so far as Gannon knew, no other man had been given the job; he was not anxious to have anyone compete with him for the prize.

"You have a warrant?" he demanded.

The tall one smiled overbearingly. "Sure I have a warrant," he said and produced it. It bore the lieutenant-governor's signature. Gannon's dislike for Sanders increased.

This was an important case; the murdered man had been a cousin of Brant Willoughby, a powerful figure in politics and a very close friend of the state governor's. One of the Willoughbys had been shot down in cold blood and the murderer had escaped. Who would be more able to bring him in than the famous Tom Gannon. But then, what was this confounded Sanders doing on his trail? The state's attorney had told Gannon that no one else would be on the job for the first three weeks.

"You think he's come through here?" Sanders demanded.

"I don't think so."

"I been everywhere asking the same questions, and no hide or hair of him. Looks like a cold track to me. I hit this town because he was said to have friends here once. I'll hang around here awhile and maybe he'll show up."

Gannon scrutinized the man through half-closed lids. "May be a good idea," he said and turned to go, suddenly deciding to have his breakfast somewhere else. "Here's luck to you."

He smiled as he had done the second morning out, traveling north from Garrison, found the first apricot can.

It was a cold camp, carefully obliterated. But he had found the spot where the strawberry roan had been hobbled in the grass; and he found, five yards from there, where Russ Danver had sat on the ground. You found things like that by taking off your boots and covering the ground thoroughly for the slightest disturbance in grass or earth. The mark of a saddle tree, the scrape of a stirrup or a heel-dig told the story.

The next morning, trees and brush stood sharply against a chilly blue sky as Gannon broke camp and moved on. His map showed him where Danver would most likely cross the state border, at a most unpopulated stretch of country, broken up by ridges and gullies; intermittently covered by dense woods. He wanted to catch Danver before he crossed; he had no intentions of sharing the reward with anyone else, least of all Sanders.

He had been saving for years, and this bounty would enable him to retire to a small horse ranch of his own which he long had had his eye on. Like most men of his profession, he had a deep-rooted, secret hankering for hanging up his guns and becoming a private citizen with a life of his own.

He thought again of the girl, and he felt far from old. She was someone to remember, this girl, and he kept recalling little details

about her. Her eyes, her waist, her hips; the way she stood on her feet . . . her voice.

Gannon's eyes became hard when he thought of the dark, handsome Russ Danver stepping into that store; when he recalled the quick look she had given Sanders when he described Danver to her.

Time was getting short.

The strawberry roan's tracks were getting hot. That roan was a puzzle. By its description Gannon knew it to be a fine animal, slimmer and faster than the quarter horse bay he himself was riding, but why did Danver give himself away by refusing to change horses? The marshal's horse had more endurance. Was it that the fugitive, when overhauled on the trail, planned to turn and fight?

Suddenly Gannon experienced the sensation of being observed. It was instinctive; something he could not logically explain; but his hair roots crept. Behind him was flat open country; ahead of him a long undulating ridge, crested here and there with woods, yet he felt as if he was in a dark room sensing the presence of another.

HE RODE on warily till the length of the evening shadows killed the track, then got down and ate his cold supper. Later he shaped his slicker about bunches of dry grass, crowned it with his hat to simulate the form of a sleeping man, built a tiny fire near the dummy and the saddle. Then he retired to sit a short distance away against a lone dwarf pine with his Winchester across his knees, waiting.

Well past midnight, he was roused to alertness by the faint sound of a hoof striking a stone, far to the south of him. A weak moon shone dimly through a thin overcast, and he had to rely on his hearing for quite a while before he discerned the silhouette of a rider, apparently not seeing the fire, but following a path oblique to Gannon's trail.

Hastily dousing the fire with sand and dirt, Gannon moved out toward the rider, his rifle ready. It could be Danver, and if so his luck was greater than he had hoped for. But it could be Sanders.

He was two hundred yards from his camp when a sudden racket made him whirl about. The bay horse clattered into the darkness with a startled grunt, its picket rope flying. Gannon tried to throw a shot at the figure crouching on its back, but was afraid of hitting the horse, and horse and rider blended swiftly with the night.

With a curse he turned upon the approaching rider; but this one had reined in and was throwing his horse about. Before the marshal could see who it was he had vanished the way he came.

Gannon sweated blood as he trudged back to camp. He hated to think of who might have

stolen his horse. And if the other had been Sanders he certainly had been playing possum in town, pretending that he did not think Danver had come through. Suddenly he stood still and cursed as the thought struck him: Was he the victim of teamwork? Certainly he would never live this one down—to be set afoot almost within sight of his quarry!

At daylight his fire was smoking as he ate his breakfast; a sign for any travelers passing through. As for hunting up a stray horse his chances were slim; so far he had seen no signs of any in this part of the country.

He tried not to think of Russ Danver putting swift miles between them; he tried not to think of Gene Sanders taking up the track and beating him to the reward.

He was a silent, hard-bitten man, sitting there by his saddle on the ground with not a horse in sight.

Suddenly he alerted, hardly daring to hope as a rider again approached from a southerly direction; this time heading straight for his camp.

He sat without stirring, every nerve and muscle tense, till the girl came within hailing distance and called anxiously, "Hello, the camp."

Then he rose and waved her in. "Ride up and step down."

She rode to within ten yards, but did not dismount. Her face showed surprise at his identity. She scanned the surroundings for his horse, but made no comment. Apparently she was trying to interpret his presence here and slowly she understood it, though it was obvious that she had expected to find someone else.

Gannon said: "Was it you who rode up here last night just as someone sneaked in and stole my horse?"

She shook her head emphatically and remained in the saddle, refusing his invitation to a cup of coffee. A Marlin rifle rested across her pommel.

"You don't seem to trust me much," Gannon remarked dryly.

"Is there any reason why I should? I don't know you."

He shrugged and regarded her admiringly. She impressed him as much as when he had seen her in the store; perhaps more so. He was not disappointed. On horse-back she belonged; she had the look of a queen.

"Where are you traveling?" he asked.

"Just north."

He began feeling both irritated and amused. "How long have you known him?" he asked.

She did not move an eyelid. "I don't know who you mean."

He chuckled. "The young fellow who likes apricots."

"You talk in riddles," she said at once and

began kneeling her horse away. "I'm sorry I can't help you about your stolen mount. When I meet up with someone, I'll tell them you're afoot here . . ."

"Much obliged," he said, throwing the loop of his rope, which he had held in readiness behind him.

It took her neck and the barrel of the rifle neatly. She gave an enraged outcry in surprise; the horse danced a little; but before she could get the weapon untangled Gannon was at her stirrup, yanking it from her foot, pulling her out of the saddle with a swift grasp about her wrist.

SHE stood panting on the ground, tears of anger welling from her eyes as she tried in vain to free herself from his grip. "I don't want to hurt you," he said. "Stand still. I hate to do this; but you're talking to the law. I need that horse of yours. You know who I'm after. Don't you?"

Stubbornly she said nothing.

He said: "A good-looking young killer who's fond of canned apricots, and who rides a strawberry roan. A killer wanted for murdering an unarmed man. Aside from that, the less said about your interest in the matter, the better."

"Russell never killed an unarmed man. Willoughby shot first; then after Russell had shot him, someone sneaked up and took Willoughby's gun."

Gannon regarded her for a moment before he said softly, "The law decided otherwise."

"The law," she spat. "What are you doing? Do you have to do this?"

While talking he had been tying her hands together in front of her with a cantle strap. "I don't like to," he said with genuine regret. "This will hold you for five minutes at the most . . . I'll leave your rifle here for protection. There's food in my saddlebags; the coffee is still hot; make yourself at home till I come back."

He looked down at her from her saddle. "I wish we could have met under different circumstances."

She was tearing at the bonds, her face angry. "I hope you never find him. You law-hounds are all alike. You have no heart."

"The law is the law," he shrugged, as he rode off. "This is nothing personal."

He glanced back once when he was far away and saw her wrists part. She bent swiftly down and picked up the rifle. As the bullet went ineffectively short of its mark he shook his head with grim admiration. So it had to be a man like Russ Danver!

After an hour he dismounted and started tracking cautiously. Suddenly a faint suspicion of woodsmoke was carried to him on the wind. Incredulously he tied his horse and

sneaked forward, not believing that Danver would be foolish enough to light a campfire. . . .

But the description of the man he saw by the fire in the small clearing fit Russ Danver to a T. It was an odd scene: The strawberry roan snubbed close to a sapling, right foreleg hoisted up in a rope-sling from the saddle horn while the fugitive squatted by it, busily applying a steaming hot bandage which he had just extracted from the coffee pot on the fire.

Gannon took in the scene for several seconds; a strange sense of disappointment flooded him. He said, over the barrel of his pistol: "What have you got there, a bad sprain?"

Danver whirled, his jaw dropped, color drained from his face. "Don't try anything," said Gannon. "I can bring you in—warm or cold!"

There was silence for a spell, then Danver said, "Let me finish this, will you." He picked up the hot cloth he had dropped.

Gannon walked over behind him and lifted his revolver from its holster, removed the rifle that stood against a tree; then he stepped back and watched Danver pack a lump of hot clay about the bandage on the roan's leg and later strap the clay on with strips from his raincoat.

"That's a trick," Gannon said, "that I have heard of, but never seen worked." He was disappointed. Danver had a strong, somewhat hard face, but the eyes—the same strange, deep blue as the girl's at Coltrane's—were clear and had no evil in them.

"Where did you get that horse?" said Danver, rising. "I thought I had you unhorsed for a good while."

"Never mind." Gannon snapped the handcuffs on his captive. He nodded toward the strawberry roan. "Quite a horse," he said.

"My best," said Danver, staring at the cuffs between his wrists. "Had him from a colt."

Again the long silence while Gannon speculated on a ruthless killer who would shoot down an unarmed man, but would not leave his disabled horse, even though his life depended on getting away.

He said after a while, "How long before that leg is good enough to travel?" And he was suddenly conscious of a strange distaste

for this job; he wanted it over with. "I have to return this horse where I borrowed it."

Danver glanced at the girl's saddle and recognized it; a puzzled frown appeared on his brow. "A couple of hours," he said, "and we can start him three-legged. In a day or so he should be much better. A couple of hours was all I needed, and you'd never have got me."

Gannon ran his hand over the roan's flank and legs with an appreciative glance. "Plenty of Arab in him," he said. "A fine animal. You won't need him any more. Sell him?"

"Not to you," said Danver.

"No, I guess not." Gannon almost chuckled. He looked at the fire. "Got any coffee?"

They sat on either side of the fire, the handcuffed man and his captor, and watched the coffee come to a boil.

Long after the coffee was drunk, Danver at last broke the silence: "It's a bitter thing to have come so far, and to fail. If Terry only hadn't stumbled in that hole. . . . He was tired. . . ." The man's voice grew bitter. "This must give you a lot of satisfaction."

"There's nothing personal. It's a job, that's all."

"You get a bounty; a bounty for an innocent man."

Despite himself, Gannon felt uncomfortable. "They're all innocent," he said dryly. "If you're innocent, why be afraid of a trial?"

"In that town?" Danver spat out acidly. "You marshals know nothing of politics. I was framed. After I shot it out with Willoughby, one of his friends stepped out of a side door to the alley and removed his gunbelt. They raised a great cry that I had killed an unarmed man."

"How do you know that that man took the gunbelt off? Did you see him do it?" Gannon demanded.

Danver shook his head. "A friend of mine, an old Mexican who used to work on my father's horse ranch for years, was sleeping off a drunk in the alley that night. He saw this man step out into the alley and snatch George Willoughby's gunbelt."

"Well, there's your witness."

Russell Danver was bitter. "I tell you, you don't know that town. It's all Willoughby; but it used to be all Danver, till my father was killed. They'd never let the Mexican get into court; they'd kill him if they thought he'd

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seen it. Alonzo wanted to testify. But I said, wait."

Gannon kept studying Danver. So this man, rather than risk his friend's life had pulled out. He said, "Well, it's a good story, anyhow."

"Yes," said Danver and spat into the fire. "It's a good story. And that's all."

The truthfulness of Danver's story was outside of his job. But he asked one more question as a sudden thought dawned upon him: "Does the man know that somebody did see him?"

Russell Danver nodded. "He knows; but not who. That's my only ace card—if any."

Gannon fell into deep thought again. This was nothing to him; nothing at all. He had his job; and the bonus was waiting. Suddenly he got to his feet. "I hear a horse." Danver, too, rose.

A minute later the girl from Coltrane's rode into camp. At the sight of Danver handcuffed beside Gannon her hand went for her rifle. Russ Danver, however called at once to her, "No, no, don't do anything foolish. That's not the way. It would only make things worse."

She knew that already, and dismounted quietly, her glance full of bitterness as she looked at Gannon, an ocean of unsaid words in her eyes. That stung the marshal in a place he did not think he could be hurt; but it was worse still to see the look she gave Danver and the look he returned. He felt like an intruder.

"What can we do now, Russell?" she said in a hopeless, low tone. Danver bit his lower lip.

"Don't give up yet."

"You'll never have a chance in that town."

Gannon's voice was gritty when he spoke. "I see you're mounted again. Where did you get that horse?"

She said reluctantly, "From the tall dark man; he rode into camp looking for you. Since a lawman stole my horse I returned the deed; you're all of the same breed."

"I see," said Gannon.

Danver moved over and examined the roan's leg while the girl followed him. They were standing close, looking at the horse, looking at one another. Gannon thought of his job, of the reward awaiting him; of the horse ranch. He looked at the girl, whose eyes just now were resting in the younger man's. For this moment only the two of them existed.

Gannon broke the quiet. "Danver," he said. "The man you said took that gunbelt—would his name be Gene Sanders?"

The handcuffed man whirled upon him. "How did you know?"

The marshal rose. "Time to travel," he said. "Let's move on."

FROM a slight rise west of Tom Gannon's morning camp the three of them looked down upon the man called Sanders, who sat in front of the fire, cooking himself an afternoon meal out of provisions from Gannon's saddle bags.

Gannon lay down in the grass, rested his Winchester on a rock, set his sight for a hundred and fifty yards, and drew a bead.

He said to Russell Danvers: "Now walk on in and pretend surprise when you recognize him. Tell him you escaped from me and lost your horse."

From the rise the marshal and the girl watched Danver, unarmed and with the handcuffs making his gait awkward, approach camp. It became a strange little stage to watch as the sitting figure looked up and saw the standing one. There was a gesture of surprise from both.

The drama was short: The tallest figure glanced swiftly about after a brief exchange of words. His hand went to his hip. Metal flashed in the afternoon sun.

Marshal Tom Gannon's rifle jerked slightly as he pulled the trigger; the girl from Coltrane's let out her pent-up breath sharply.

"He was trailing me till I would catch you," Gannon said later. "He was too yellow to tackle you himself, or not a good enough tracker. Once I caught you he planned to kill you from ambush. No one would be the wiser, and he would not have to worry about any witness . . . but you're right, that town of yours must smell powerful bad."

"Maybe we can change that yet," said Danver.

They turned to Sanders who sat pale on the ground, his arm in a crude sling. Gannon's bullet had torn a large hole in his upper left arm. Danver had his signed confession in his pocket. "Get up now," said Gannon and prodded him with his boot. "Get up and travel."

Without a word Sanders climbed laboriously into his saddle and started southward. Still later Gannon saw Danver and the girl mount. He shook hands with first one, then the other.

As he stood by the girl's stirrup, she suddenly bent down and kissed him swiftly on the cheek, then wheeled her horse away.

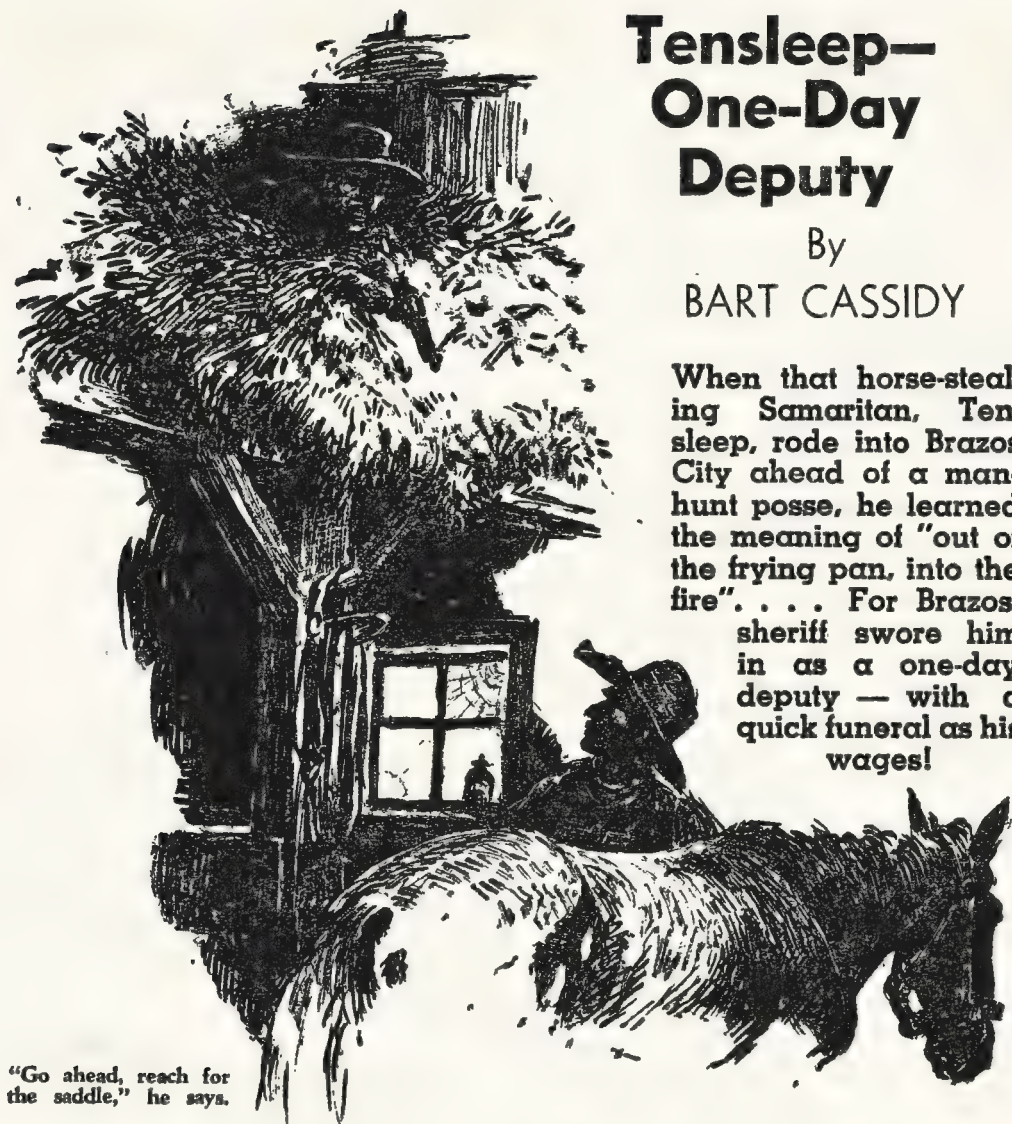
And he kept standing on the same spot staring after them till he no longer could see them. At last he turned and stirred the fire under the coffee pot. As he sat down, a great loneliness came and sat with him and he faced it grimly. He was in no hurry; he could wait a day or two before traveling on.

A few yards away the three-legged roan hobbled about, nibbling at the grass. It would make a fine start for a horse ranch, Gannon considered as he fanned the fire with his hat. However slight, that was some consolation. . . .

Tensleep— One-Day Deputy

By
BART CASSIDY

When that horse-stealing Samaritan, Tensleep, rode into Brazos City ahead of a man-hunt posse, he learned the meaning of "out of the frying pan, into the fire". . . . For Brazos' sheriff swore him in as a one-day deputy — with a quick funeral as his wages!



"Go ahead, reach for the saddle," he says.

IT TAKES what the shysters call a "pre-amble" to give you the picture of the way things set that July night. Carley X. Shell, which ain't his name, is a fair-to-middlin' politician, a damned crook an' a poor sheriff. He sees a chance to get himself out of a jam by nabbin' a certain gent—mention no names—he used to share blankets an' grub with in the good old days. Lured by the thousand simoleons on that gent's hide, he chases him across four counties, payin' no more attention to borders than a itchy pup does to a new flea.

That's a hundred an' fifty mile as the buzzard flies; nearly two hundred as the tired horses of a posse track their hoofs. Now said posse's combin' the Uncompahgre Mesa for

cold sign, an' Missus Maxon's little boy Tensleep's enjoyin' bacon, coffee an' a cigarette by a little campfire in Red Box Valley, not too far from Brazos City.

I've just watered Glory Hawss at the crick an' I'm sprawled luxurious by the fire when the ground brings me the faint clippity-clop of racin' hoofbeats in the moonlight. Holy cow! Have I guessed wrong?

I bounce up, scatterin' the coals with a swipe of my boot, listenin'. Riders is headin' straight for me. I reach for the .30-30 on my saddle an', as luck will have it, tip over the skillet an' dump the bacon grease. It flares up in a hiss of flame. The light draws a yell from them riders. They fan out, throwin' lead. I

duck behind a boulder, firin' at the muzzle flashes dancin' a half-circle about me.

They fog me good, blastin' my breastwork, slashin' brush an' the coals of my fire. I save ca'tridges, awaitin' their charge. They must think I'm finished, for some leather-lunged gent yells. Then they whirl their ponies an' hightail to'rds Brazos City.

Cussin' that they've sieved my skillet, I saddle Glory an' bed down five mile off, wonderin' why anybody but the Moffat posse would waste all that lead on me. Next mornin', curiosity's got me by the throat. Certain the posse is still lost in the Uncompahgres, I ride into Brazos—a run-of-the-mill cow-country county seat.

It's early an' swamper muckin' out the saloons eye me suspicious. That should o' warned me, but Glory needs oats an' I stall him in the barn an' hit for the lunch counter, run by a brisk, bright-eyed gal, so good-lookin' I'm ashamed of my five-day whiskers an' dirty neck. Before I'm finished with breakfast, groups of men have gathered in the street, talkin' excitedly, lookin' my way.

"What ails them gents?" I ask the gal. "Your place afire, or something?"

She stares outside. "Must be you, mister. We had robbers here last night, and a killing. All strangers are bound to be under suspicion. Nothing to worry about if you can account for yourself."

"What fer an accounting," I ask myself, "can I make?" The rabbit in me comes out an' I leave my coffee undrunk. On the walk, I light a cigarette an' walk to the barn, nonchalant. I'm liftin' Glory's saddle when a gent rides in an' lights down, glarin' at me. He's young, tall an' built like Jim Corbett. Twin guns hug his thighs. A white Stetson tilts back on his blond curls. An' he's wearin' a star. Cripes!

His cold eyes lance me. "You rode down-valley, follerin' a twisty trail, no?"

"Enjoyin' scenery an' gettin' a liberal education," I add, joshin'.

"Now comes the post-graduate course," he clips. "Run into anybody?"

"You said it. Six trigger-nervous gents fog my camp last night, hightailin' to'rds town when I smoke back. I lose a good skillet an' my peace o' mind. Why?"

"The same outfit holds up the store an' kills the owner—their fifth job in some eight months." He looks me up an' down. "Naturally, we're careful about strangers. I'm Greg Bridgely, actin' for Sheriff Ambaugh, who's down with rheumatism. When I put this Bronc outfit longbow, folks will be glad to support me for sheriff."

I nod, admirin' the picture of handsome, cold-blooded ambition. "Nudgin' him out while he's on his back, eh?" I sneer.

"Only provin' what everybody knows, showin' the folks what real sheriffin' is. An' you're helpin'."

"Me?" I start. "I'm busy, mister—an' boogery. Boogery Jones, they call me, most skittish of the Nucla Joneses, an' most peace-lovin'."

"Nucla?" He acts interested. "Know Bill Banners, the postmaster?"

"Hell yes, everybody knows Bill, I guess."

"You're a liar! I made the name up."

"My mistake," I mutter. We glare at one another. He's jinglin' a stack of silver dollars an', when he drops one an' stoops for it, I'm tempted to kick him in the head, saddle an' light out. I'm sorry I don't when he straightens, his gun lined at my belly.

"You got sixty seconds to decide, Tensleep," he snarls. "I can use you or the thousand dollars you're worth. Like this: you confessed last night's killin's, made a break an' I killed you. Now how about that help?"

"Brother," I say, fervent, "you got a helper. Who you want murdered?"

"Cut that. Sheriff Shell wired to be watchin' for you, so it's to your interest to play to my leads. My men will watch you. A sneak will earn you a hum in the back."

I express undyin' loyalty, never mentionin' that Sheriff Hobbs Ambaugh let me outa his jail some years ago, one minute ahead of the hangmob. I owe him a lot.

"What's next?" I ask, interested.

"Leather your horse and we'll ride. I cut the Bronc's trail this morning and we'll follow it to the body."

"Storekeeper's body?"

"No. Feller who fought 'em in the store. They carried him off."

I SADDLE an' we ride to the street, where we're joined by three hawssbackers—a skinny, bucktoothed, double-heeled youngster an' two bearded gents lookin' like the Smith Brothers. Noticin' me studyin' 'em, Bridgely chuckles. "Three arguments against monkey-business, Tensleep. Bud and Fud Huckabey and Lintback Avon who's chain-lightning. We'll pick up Tom Plentybear at the Wolf Den."

The Wolf Den Saloon's at the edge of town an' Tom Plentybear proves to be a Cheyenne buck with white man's six-shooter ways, tight lips an' murderous sullen eyes. With this prize outfit, I lope up-valley. We pick up hoof-marks in the moist ground an' foller 'em along a line of hills to a place where the ground's chewed up by hoofs an' spike heels an' marked by the imprint of a man's body. Blood-spots led to a bearberry thicket . . . an' the body of a man killed with clubbed pistol-barrels. Beat to death.

He's almost unrecognizable, but first-glimpse

shocks me, wakes old memories. It's Burt Herrick—a Little Rockies cowman who bucked railroad plug-uglies an' was kept outa Butch Cassidy's Wild Bunch because of a broke back that put him afoot for years. Last I heard of him he was investigatin' for the Livestock Association. One fine man an' a good friend to a wild an' homeless boy.

Regret must show on my face, 'cause Bridgely sneers. "Crooks taste profits an' fall out. This stranger's hung around town for a week, casin' the store job. His mates saved me the trouble of killin' him."

"Wasted time an' trouble, didn't they?" I ask. "Considerin' a posse mighta bin on their trail. One shot an' one second woulda killed him just as dead. Don't make sense."

Bridgely flushes. "You got a better theory?"

"Not unless he happened to be a lawman that—" I suggest.

"You're a liar!" he raps, furious, an' drops his hand to his gun. Timin' it, Lintback shoulders me an' snatches my cutter. Good teamwork. I'm braced for what Burt got. But Bridgely figgers it different. "This gent's a Bronc an' bounty in our pockets. Likewise a nail in Ambaugh's coffin. Quiet your damned opinions, Tensleep, an' think right or—well, you know what. You take the carcass on your saddle."

"What about my lead-squirter?" I grin, mirthless.

"You'll get it when you have real use for it. Let's go."

That's a long ride with bruised, bloody, stiffening Burt Herrick in the saddle before me. Every mile my mad builds up, until I whisper in his unheeding ear, "I ain't forgot how you steered me, Burt. This gang must be handlin' cattle an' some member knew you. Mebbe they hit the store just to get you. I'll find out who beefed you an' pay him off; I promise."

In town a crowd gathers, among 'em Hobbs Ambaugh, hobblin' with canes, aged unbelievable by sickness. He glances at me an' his eyes flicker. But he holds silent an' so do I. As we lift Burt down, the old sheriff blats, "Cripes, Greg, this ain't no outlaw. He's Burt Herrick—an Association detective I had sent down here to help nab the rustlers devilin' our ranchers. Your killin' him means hell to pay!"

"Not us," counters Bridgely. "The Broncs killed him. Detective? Then how come him to be ridin' with outlaws?"

"Because he fought 'em in the store till they got behind him an' carried him off. Then they taken out their spite by beatin' him to death. Oh, this is bad."

Shook up an' miserable, he hobbles home, Bridgely starin' after him, hard an' calculatin'. Gettin' the body to the undertaker's, the

actin' sheriff forgets me, so I stall Glory, buy a latherin' at the barbershop an' head for the restaurant.

It's only eleven o'clock an' the's one cow-puncher eatin'. When he's gone the gal proprietor takes my order. Her lips are tight pressed an' her eyes troubled. "I certainly never looked for you to come back as Greg Bridgely's man," she says, condemnin'.

"Your ears are sharp, Miss."

"I hear plenty, Jones. This time from Bridgely, who likes to torment me with his power. I—I can't believe him on oath, but this time he didn't lie."

"Anything personal in your dislike an' doubt of him, Miss?"

"I'll say there is. He paid me court, won my promise to marry him—for the money I make here; I'm sure of that now. When the bank changed hands, he tossed me over for that pale Betty Barlow. More money in her father's bank, see? But you—" she bites her lip. "You've joined him. Tell him what I've said. He's bad, but I'm not scared of him."

Here's the green monster—sometimes an ally to a hard-pressed man. "I've joined up involuntary," I tell her. An' she nods, grim.

"I know. Force and faithfulness. Look out. Watch Avon—he's a killer." She serves my dinner an' watches me eat, occasionally eyein' my empty holster. Finally, "You better buy a gun," she advises.

"Bridgely took mine, ma'am. If I buy another, I slap him in the face."

"And buck a bad outfit. No, you can't do that. Are you fast with a pistol?"

"Tain't how fast, ma'am, so much as hits an' misses. I'm straight an' steady."

Her lips purse. "I bought a gun on the hunch I'd be needing it. If Greg puts pressure on you, believing you're unarmed, then—"

A sound on the walk shuts her up. My head swivels. A swarthy, high-boned, jet-eyed face is framed in the window. Seein' he's spotted, Tom Plentybear shuffles in an' moves to the counter, eyes hard an' straight as a bullet. "What you talk, huh?" he asks the gal. "What you tell um, huh?"

She fills my cup, glarin' at him. "Never mind, Warwhoop. Tuck your feathers and make mocassin-tracks before I butcherknife a scalp for my chromo of Custer's Last Stand. Git!"

He glares, still as a snake, snarling. "Some time Plentybear cut Cookfire Squaw's bad tongue out," he mutters an' turns his eyes to me. "Greg want you in Wolf Den, right away." I grunt, watch him stalk out. There's a sob an' the gal's slippin' a new .45 under my hand. I pop it under my shirt, stirred by the tears wellin' in her eyes.

"Thanks, sister, an' don't worry."

"Luck to you, Jonesy. An' straight shoot-

ing." She takes the dollar I hand her an' watches me walk out, lookin' like she's lost her last friend, which mebbe she has.

THERE'S several drinkers at the Wolf Den bar, but Bridgely ain't one. The barkeep winks, jerks his head rearward. I walk back. A "come in" answers my knock an' I enter. Bridgely is there, with scowlin' Plentybear. I light a stogie, set down an' cock my boots onto the table. The actin' sheriff scowls. "Make yourself at home, Tensleep. You get your gun back tonight."

"Yeah?" I blow rings. "Nice of you, feller. Got the victim chose, eh?"

"Blast you!" he rages. "You keep civil an' let me run things or I'll jug you. I'm tipped—never mind how—that the Broncs raid Barlow's bank tonight. You an' Plentybear will stake out an' mow 'em down. We'll split the bounty three ways. Tonight Brazos sees a real sheriff in action."

"From those tracks," I protest, "we'll be outnumbered three-four to one."

"Easy, Tensleep. You'll have cover and surprise with you. They'll bring Ben Barlow, under the gun, to open up, and—"

"Your future daddy-in-law collects lead an' you collect a bank. Nice!"

He sputters ragefully an' Plentybear grunts, "Cookfire Squaw wag long tongue. She tell 'um. Dead squaw good squaw."

"Shut up!" barks Bridgely. "One more crack, Tensleep, an' in you go. Well?"

"I'll play, Bridgely. You got me where the hair's short."

"Damn' right. I go in the back of the bank at ten sharp. At five to ten you and Plentybear stand across from the bank. An' no shootin' as they come in, savvy? When you hear me shoot an' they boil out, blast 'em over. That should win me the sheriff's job. An' nice for you, Tensleep, hidin' behind a deputy's badge."

"Worth workin' hard for," I murmur, non-committal. But I don't like the smell of it as I while away the afternoon, thinkin' heavy. Why didn't Bridgely mention Lintback an' the Huckabey Twins? Ain't they in on the split? Everything points to Bridgely takin' the pot—honor, loot an' freedom from incriminatin' evidence. Somewhere in Brazos a bullet in the back waits for little Tensleep. Cripes!

Thinkin' makes me jumpy. By dusk I'm broke out with a rabbit-eared rash. I put down the saloon paper, buy a drink an' head out. Partin' the saloon doors, I stop, draw back. Carley Shell an' his Moffat County posse is ridin' past, dusty, tired and sour. They ride into the barn an' come rattlin' out to enter the La Plata Hotel. I run for the barn, hopin' nobody's watchin' Glory. I'm curryin' the critter's back when the mow hay crackles an'

Lintback Avon's lookin' down. "Aimin' to work some kinks outa him?" he smirks.

"There's an idea," I grin. "Good way to work the fat off his carcass."

"An' a lead whistler in yore neck, feller. Go ahead; reach for the saddle."

I don't. Takin' time to brush Glory good, I turn over my chances. Not so good. I kill a half-hour there, Lintback watchin' like a hawk. Nursin' a inferiority complex, as the feller said, I go to the alley, weighin' the hard facts. Brazos ain't big enough for me an' Carley Shell. It's dark an' I can hook a pony on the street, but I can't leave Glory. Besides, there's my promise to poor Burt an' my debt to Hobbs Ambaugh.

Avoidin' lights, I head to'rds Ambaugh's cottage. My knock fetches his wife to the door. "Hobbs?" She looks me over. "He's at the hotel. Business. It important?"

"No, ma'am. I'll ketch him as he leaves. Thank y'."

Everything's against me. I take a stand between buildings, where I can watch the hotel front. Ol' Hobbs is with Carley Shell, discussin' me, an' the talk'll probably run past ten o'clock. An' me between the devil an' the sea.

From here I can see the lighted lunch counter, watchin' business taper off till only Plentybear is loafin' over his coffee. I shift my glance to the hotel for a minute an' when I look back, the counter's dark, only light showin' at the door into the gal proprietor's livin' quarters.

I'm weighin' this, uneasy, when I hear a female voice ringin' strange—like a rattlin' of chains. I race across the street, approachin' by the alley. I hear the gal say, "You wouldn't. If I scream, it will draw—" She chokes off, strangely.

I leap for the knob, shouldering' inside. Plentybear's got her by the throat, backed against the wall. She's fightin' an' he's hard put to hold her. He throws a look across his shoulder, grunts, "You, eh? Here, hold squaw's hands."

"Why?" I clip. "What you aimin' to do?"

"Me cut her damn' tongue out."

"Cut hell!" I bark. "Turn her loose, you fool."

He jerks his knife, snarlin'. "Not help me, huh? All right, me do it alone. Me cut her tongue so she not talk. Me deputy. Me kill you for hurtin' her, see?"

I see, an' it's plain he thinks I'm not heeled. That's proved when he saucers at my gun.

"Drop that shiv, you redskinned son of Satan! Elevate!"

His dark face grays. The knife drops an' he h'ists. I motion him doorwards an' his snake-eyes glitter as he moves. I must look small to him 'cause suddenly he aways my

way, as if to crush me down. My gun buries in his belly as the slug tunnels his guts. The explosion's muffled to nothin'. He spills like a rock, dyin'.

THE GAL flings herself into my arms, sobbin' terrible. "Take me away from this awful place," she begs. "Take me with you." Her face tilts up an' I can't resist her yieldin'. I kiss her lips an' then, gettin' hold of myself, release her, pat her cheek.

"Lady," I say, sympathetic, "I can't damn any woman with my coyote life. Things will straighten here, after tonight. Dry your tears. We've lots to do an' time's short."

"What is it?" she asks, snappin' out of it, brave.

"I want you to call Sheriff Ambaugh out of the La Plata House."

down, leavin' Barlow inside with Bridgely."

"So what?" asks Hobbs. "Looks like Greg's set to trap them varmints. Good."

"If you believe that's all right," I growl, "you're helpin' Bridgely grab the bank as well as your job. Get some of the old fire in your tail, Hobbs. I'm going in the back window of that bank, behind Bridgely, an' do what I can to save Ben Barlow's life. You stake out Shell's posse across from the bank an' along both sides, to nab 'em as they come out—if any. But let 'em get in, see? Otherwise we won't get what we need on your precious actin' sheriff."

"What about you?" he asks, dubious.

"I'll wait here till you post the posse an' get back. Then you an' me—we're goin' behind the bank. I want you to listen in, from the window. Sure I'll be takin' a risk, but I

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She nods, dabs her eyes an' pulls on a jacket. We go out, hurryin' down the alley to the hotel rear, me waitin' in the gloom while she enters. In five minutes, she's out, bringin' Hobbs Ambaugh.

"You wild young fool," he scolds, when we've shook hands. "Don't you know Sheriff Shell's here, cravin' yore carcass? Look at the position you put me in."

"Look at the position Bridgely puts you in, Hobbs. Nudgin' you out of office."

"Politics," he mutters. "Age must give way to youth."

"Not at your age," I counter, "nor not that youth. He's leader of the Broncs."

"No!" gasps the restaurant gal, provin' she still loves handsome Bridgely.

"No!" echoes Ambaugh, provin' Bridgely's right about him bein' too old.

"Tonight will tell," I argue. "I want Shell's posse to help prove the truth."

"Shell? How?"

"I just killed Plentybear, Hobbs. This young lady will tell you the facts after she's got the undertaker to remove the body." She takes the hint, hurryin' away. I pull out Hobbs' watch. It's a quarter to ten. "In fifteen minutes," I tell him, "Bridgely enters the rear of the bank. At the same time the Broncs lead Banker Barlow in the front, under gun. Me an' Plentybear was to wait till the Broncs come out with the money, then blast 'em

owe my friend Burt Herrick that much. An' when the smoke settles—" I chuckle—"I'll have squared our little account, Hobbs. Can do?" I hold out my hand. He grabs it.

"Go yuh if I lose, Tensleep. I wouldn't do this for every damned horsethief, but I've allus liked an' trusted you, God knows why. I'll get them things done an' be right back." He ducks into the hotel.

"Hurry," I call after him. "We ain't got much more'n five minutes."

I take off my spurs while I'm waitin', put 'em in my pocket. The minutes drag out unbelievable. About the time I've given Hobbs up an' am set to tackle the thing alone, he comes clumpin' down the alley.

"All fixed," he mutters. "Lead out, son."

We skirt the lights an' head for the rear of the stone bank. It's ten o'clock an' black dark. Ahead of us, in the alley, a horse whinnies. I grab Hobbs, pull him to a stop. "Wait here," I whisper. "I'll take a gander at that horse."

Huggin' the shadows, I slide ahead, straining my eyes. Now I see the horses. There's two—tied to the corner of the bank. I glide to 'em, pause there. An' then I see the man-shape hangin' over the window sill. I move to'rds him. He senses my approach, whirls an' straightens. "Who's that?"

"Me—Tensleep. Where's that Injun?"

(Please turn to page 79)

WANTED—SINGLE-JACK



Thrilling Novel of a Miners' War

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

A hard-rock engineer, Bill Nolan thought he knew all the tricks of the game from ore to ingots . . . But in wild, strife-torn Colfax, he found, his task was one the textbooks didn't cover—to blast loose from its tenacious hold the most ruthless mining-and-murder combine that ever threatened rich Cochise Valley!

CHAPTER ONE

Welcome to Boothill!

BILL NOLAN listened to the rough clicking of the flat-wheeled trucks under the rickety little coach in which he rode. The clicking was a mocking chorus, monotonously repeated:

Sucker—sad-eyed sucker—

The clicking was right. Nolan knew why. This wasn't business, much as he tried to persuade himself it was. As mining engineers went, Bill Nolan was a big man—too big to

FIGHTING MEN!



Bill stood watching. . . .

be interested in a shin-bone little copper outfit like Cochise Valley's Pueblo Mining Company. He was losing money on this trip; he was losing much bigger fees from bigger concerns. So it wasn't business. He was using Medora Beckley's letter on the little copper outfit's stationery as an excuse, and he was riding this antiquated rattler north from the main line junction with the hope of having one more try at selling Bill Nolan's stock to Zella

Warden, and wondering just how to do it.

Zella had passed him up—a year ago, when she was out in the river towns. She'd been plain enough about it—and firm. She was going to marry Neil Arnold, the son of an Eastern money-bags who had settled into the valley and bought into the Pueblo Company a couple of seasons before, when the shaft of the Pueblo Mine was watered and the little outfit was in bad straits.

Nolan shifted uncomfortably against the jolting of the single little coach and grinned wryly to himself. Funny how a man could chalk up his mark in his trade and make it stick; how he could develop a sureness in dealing with others and a lot of professional pride and then go plowing wilfully into a place where he knew he'd take a hiding—for a woman who didn't want him!

They'd told him, down at the main-line junction while he was waiting for this ore train to come down and head back toward Colfax, that the top end of the valley was a good place to keep away from, for a man who didn't have a stake in things up there. But he hadn't paid too much attention. He had been thinking about Zella. A gossipy waitress had assured him that young Arnold wasn't married, yet. And that meant more than any talk he could pick up about the Pueblo mine.

Now he wondered a little, wishing he had listened to gossip about the mine a little more closely. He didn't know much about Cochise Valley beyond the fact that it was Zella's home. He recollected that she had told him some details during the winter he had hopefully squired her about St. Louis. The Pueblo Mining Company had been a community enterprise in the beginning, a copper lead which had been partially developed under the leadership of this Medora Beckley, who had now written to him. The venture had apparently been weighted with hard luck, and the small scale on which the lead was worked had forced the little outfit against the wall about the time the Arnolds had come into the valley.

The Pueblo outfit had been driven to selling a little stock and the control of this spur line which it had built to haul ore down-valley to the smelter. Arnold had bought the mining stock and the road control.

Guessing, Nolan thought it likely that hard luck had continued. The Beckley woman wasn't a miner—she was, he thought, a schoolteacher, if he remembered Zella's talks. The valley was probably at the point of giving up. The Pueblo stockholders probably had their bellies full of a mining man's grief and were ready to sell out to an outfit which had the cash to develop the property.

This would explain the Beckley woman writing to Nolan. Cannily, the valley people might want an independent expert's appraisal of the property, against which to compare any offers made them.

Nolan didn't care a hell of a lot why he was wanted in Colfax. The thing that counted was that the only way the Beckley woman or any one else in the valley could have gotten his name was through Zella. Which meant Zella still remembered. And that was more important to Bill Nolan than any fee.

Brake shoes clattered on flattened wheels.

The bucking of the little coach eased. Nolan, the car's single passenger, glanced curiously out the window at forbidding and barren flats. The conductor came in the front end of the car.

"The Cottonwoods—" he said. "We take on water here. Got a stiff grade ahead. Got about five minutes—"

THE trainman ducked back into the forward vestibule. Nolan's legs were cramped. He shoved out into the aisle, moved to the rear vestibule, and swung out and down to the gravel of the ballast. The trail crew was swarming over the rusty engine at the head of the long string of empty ore cars coupled ahead of the single coach. They were wrestling the spout of the staved, three-legged water tank into the filler-dome of the tender. Nolan leaned back against the side of the coach, built a cigarette, and touched it alight. A footstep crunched on the gravel. He turned.

Three men came around the end of the car. They moved unhurriedly. Nolan knew that there was accident neither in their appearance here or the way they carelessly ringed him. He watched them, curious and a little uneasy.

Two of the three were ordinary hands of the kind always for hire throughout the Southern country—for any job, if the pay was right. They could ride to stock or swing a single-jack or drive a plow-team. They could deal cards at a professional table or cap for a shell game or do business at a bank behind a mask—if the profit outweighed the risk. Shiftless, truculent, they still were not dangerous, except when they worked for killer's pay.

The third man was of an entirely different stamp. Nolan had seen men like him wreck a smoothly-running mine with a few hours of talk among the miners. Ones like this cared less for money than for power. They were not big enough to be kingpins, but they were flinty and dependable lieutenants. Nolan's uneasiness increased.

"You're Will Nolan, the mining engineer from St. Louis?" the third man asked. "Hightailin' into Colfax because old Beckie sent for you, eh?"

There was a pause in which Nolan knew he could make denial. He said nothing. The man shrugged.

"Old Beckie's side of the fence ain't healthy, Nolan," the man went on evenly. "The Pueblo don't need no engineers and there's a spot sixty-three all staked on Boothill for the gent that don't savvy that. Don't get off in Colfax, Nolan. Ride this rattler back south, or go up a hill in a pine box. You won't get told again!"

The man smiled pleasantly, as though he had only passed the time of day, and nodded to

his companions. The trio turned and crossed behind the car to the far side of the tracks. The conductor shoved his head out from the forward vestibule and bellowed a warning. The spout on the water-tank swung back and up. Steam racketed in the exhaust. Drivers churned. The car began to roll.

Nolan caught the rail of the vestibule and swung up. The conductor came out of the car as he reached the platform. The forward motion of the train exposed the three men who had threatened Nolan, now sitting saddle beside the ballast. Nolan tipped his head toward them.

"Who are those lads?" he asked the conductor quietly.

The trainman blinked owlish eyes, looked thoughtfully at the trio, and turned back to Nolan with a flat, guileless expression.

"Lads—?" he asked. "What lads?"

Without waiting for an answer, and with a grin across his stubby face, he turned back into the coach. Nolan followed, anger beginning to churn up in him. Mining was his business. He had battered his way through the long pull to get to the top of it. He had a reputation as a sound engineer. And despite his personal reasons for coming into this valley, he had a bona fide professional job to do in Colfax.

When an outfit hired Will Nolan, they got full measure for their money. And he wasn't a man who liked being pushed—even a little. . . .

THE clattering little train hauled into Colfax in the bright evening hour after sunset. For twenty miles it had been running through lush country, scattered thickly with well-kept farms along the lower levels and prosperous ranches along the higher slopes where lack of water made graze the best crop. That twenty miles had been a revelation to Nolan. He had a picture of the valley based only on the fact that it contained a copper mine. Geography seldom located copper leads in otherwise rich country. He had expected Cochise Valley to be a barren place, and he had hoped a man would not have to argue too hard to tempt a beautiful woman like Zella Warden to leave it.

He saw now that persuading Zella would take more than argument. The valley had an air of good living, prosperity and neighborliness which somehow did not fit the warning which had been delivered to him at The Cottonwoods. But Nolan wondered if the Pueblo Company needed an engineer as much as it might need a man of an older, gun-hung profession.

The Colfax station was at the lower end of the town's well-kept street. A cheap hotel was across the street from the station. Three

or four men were tilted back in battered chairs on the porch of the hotel when the train rolled in. Carrying his square, expensive leather case, Nolan swung down, passed through the station, and came out onto the street. He noted the men on the verandah of the hotel but made nothing of them. One appeared to be sleeping. Two others were idly watching a third who had a rag on his lap and was cleaning a gun.

Nolan paused on the walk in front of the station. A buggy came down the street, a small, single-horse buggy with a neatly groomed pony in the shafts and its finish shining with care. The buggy swung in before Nolan and a woman stepped down from it with energetic ease. She was a small woman, spare and quick of movement, and as carefully groomed as her rig. She stepped briskly up to Nolan, eyeing him frankly, and walked completely around him. Nolan colored under the scrutiny. But his embarrassment vanished when the woman stopped suddenly in front of him and thrust out her hand.

"I'm Medora Beckley, Mister Nolan—" she offered—"Beckie to you by tomorrow, probably. I'd have met you if the Arnolds'd ever get a train crew that could bring a passenger in on time. Welcome to Colfax!"

Nolan grinned at Medora Beckley's wry humor and met the grip of her extended hand. The grip was firm, strong. The woman's eyes were level, honest, and tremendously alive. Bill tried to figure it, then gave up. Age was something which didn't fit a woman like this. They aged about so far, then time and trouble seemed to pass over them without leaving any further mark.

"I'd like to get a room, ma'am," he said. "Then, if you like, we could talk business."

"Tonight?" Medora Beckley asked. "Of course not. I've ridden that train once or twice since the Arnolds have been running it. I was stiff for a week. Tomorrow's soon enough. And we won't talk business, then. We've got to get acquainted. Here, throw your bag up and I'll drop you off at the Aztec Inn. I'll be in again in the morning."

Bill nodded, stepped across the walk, and lifted his bag into the little buggy. As he did so, a gun smashed sudden echoes along the street. An unseen hand ripped a long ribbons of top-covering from the buggy hood, just above his head.

THE four men on the porch of the hotel across the street were on their feet. Three of them were staring at the man who had been cleaning his gun. He was standing, looking down stupidly at the weapon still smoking in his hand.

"That was a fool stunt, Rye!" one man growled. The words carried clearly across

the quiet street. "You hit Beckie's buggy!" The man with the gun stepped down onto the walk.

"Snapped a loaded chamber. Thought it was empty. You all right, Miss Beckie?"

"Didn't hear me holler, did you?" the woman answered tartly.

The man turned sheepishly back onto the hotel porch. Beckie looked at the tear in the hood of her buggy. Her eyes shuttled and Nolan saw she was doing what he had already done—measuring the margin by which he had escaped death.

"Cyrus Arnold ought to know better than to pinch pennies when he's hiring help!" she said acidly. "A gun that can't shoot straight isn't worth a nickel. If I were you, I'd bolt my door at the Aztec tonight, Mister Nolan!"

Bill grinned tightly.

"That lad could shoot all right," he said quietly. "This was just a warning. My number isn't up—quite yet!"

Beckie shot him a quick glance and stepped into the buggy. Stragglers, drawn by the shot, were hurrying down the street. More came around the corner of the station. Nolan recognized one of these as the leader of the mounted trio which had met the ore-train at The Cottonwoods. Medora Beckley saw the man and stiffened on the seat. The man grinned, stopping on the walk a yard from Bill.

"Close," he said. "And a stranger in town, too. Hell of a greeting, ain't it?" His smile was mocking. "Could have been killed your first night in Colfax—by accident!"

Bill eyed the man steadily.

"I don't like accidents that happen right on time!" he said with unmistakeable distinctness. The man grinned, and his grin was a challenge. Nolan picked it up. He lowered his foot from the step and turned. "Accidents can happen to anyone," he went on evenly. "Maybe something like this—"

Bill took a swinging step forward. His shoulder described a small, swift circle. His arm, on this fluid fulcrum, stroked with swift, gaining surety. It was a beautiful, driving blow with the full weight of Nolan's body and the drive of his anger behind it. His knuckles crashed squarely against the flat line of the grinning man's jaw and flung him against the clapboards of the Colfax station—so solidly that the double front doors of the building rattled with the impact. The man slid down the wall into a limp heap on the walk. The crowd, hurrying forward, halted and began to scatter self-consciously as though this were something in which it wanted no part.

Bill pulled down the sleeves of his coat, turned, and stepped up into Medora Beckley's buggy.

"If you don't mind driving me past that hotel, ma'am—" he said steadily.

Medora Beckley let her breath out with audible slowness. She studied his face intently. Her lips parted in a sudden, humorless smile.

"If I told you that man was Jeff Hardin you wouldn't blink—no, you wouldn't! Mind driving you to the Inn, Bill Nolan? Sakes alive! I been wondering how to introduce you to Colfax so folks'd know just where you stood. You've taken care of that—you've taken care of that perfectly!"

A silent chuckle shook the slim body. She clucked to her shaft-pony and turned her buggy.

"Zella Warden's a sweet angel. Maybe she knows where a body can put their finger on a good mining engineer—but she's an almighty poor judge of men! There's no guessing about your door at the Aztec, now. You lock it the minute you get in and keep it that way till I get back to town in the morning and come after you! We're going to take care of you, Bill Nolan. And we're going to spit in the Arnolds' eye. It's time there was a little hell-raising on our side for a change—and you're the man to do it!"

CHAPTER TWO

Challenge of the Cochise

THE AZTEC had an appearance of comfort which was welcome after the ride on the ore-line up from the junction to the south. Nolan found a room had been reserved for him. He registered and followed the Mexican boy to his quarters.

There had been a number of people in the lobby. Some of them had been close enough to hear him identify himself to the clerk on duty. Among these was a pompous, over-dressed man who shared a settee with a younger, idle-appearing companion. Nolan had been aware of their interest. As he started up the stairs, he thought he saw this pair in motion.

They were obviously neither farmers or ranchers. He doubted if they were bankers, or merchants. They lacked the professional friendliness of such gentry. And they ran a little more heavily to class than tin horns and gamblers were apt to attempt, even in so prosperous a community. He was more inclined to tag them as strangers, like himself, apart from life in Colfax. He was a little curious over their interest in him.

Shedding his coat, he sloshed travel dust from his face in a corner basin and set about unpacking. Halfway through this brief task, a knock sounded on his door. He thought swiftly of Medora Beckley's warning about his lock, which he had not yet heeded.

The knock sounded again. Thinking it might

be the Mexican boy with additional bedding or on some other errand, he crossed and opened the door. The two men—one young and the other old—whom he had marked in the lobby, were standing in the hall. The older man waved his cigar.

"Want to talk to you, Nolan—if you've got a minute," he said confidently.

Neither man appeared dangerous. The eyes of both were self-confident—maybe even a little scornful. But Nolan could detect no truculence in either. A natural curiosity pulled at him. He'd have to know as much about this town as he did about the Pueblo mine if he were to turn out a good job in the yet-unexplained work for which he had been brought into the Cochise. This might be a good starter. He stepped back from the door. "Sure," he agreed. "I was just turning in. But if it's important—"

The older man hacked importantly in his throat. "It is—for you," he agreed.

When the door was closed, the older man fixed his pop-eyes on Bill.

"I'm Cyrus Arnold, Nolan," he said importantly. "This is my son, Neil. I'm not going to hedge. The Pueblo outfit—that is to say, that stiff-backed old Beckley woman—has brought you in here. My son and myself have put a lot of money into this valley—good Eastern money in amounts people out here can't even understand. We intend to protect our investment. We intend to enlarge it, if returns warrant it. And we intend to make what we've already invested pay dividends. You understand business. That's sound talk, isn't it?"

Nolan nodded. He was listening to the older man, but he was staring at the younger. Here, facing him, was the reason Zella Warden had not listened to him in St. Louis. His first feeling was a sudden wave of resentment.

YOUNG ARNOLD was a well-built, even-featured man. In the right light and when interest was up in his now lustreless eyes, Bill admitted to himself that he might be called handsome. He wore his modified ranch-togs with an air of familiarity which almost hid the fact that he was an outlander. But young Arnold was wholly lacking in something—forcefulness or eagerness or even the necessary deviltry which makes a man worth counting. Nolan tagged him as a wet fuse; and even counting a certain easy charm and the position created for him by the money he was bringing into the valley Zella loved so well, Bill was disappointed that it was this kind of a man who had shoved him out of the saddle.

He nodded and swung his attention back to the elder Arnold.

The big man puffed his cheeks and smiled

with satisfaction. "The Beckley woman is a thorn in our side," Cyrus Arnold went on. "When the Pueblo Company was on the rocks a number of months ago, she prevented us from acquiring control of the stock. She held onto her shares—a sizable block. And she persuaded my son's fiancée, against our advice, to hang onto hers. Medora Beckley is an old fool, but she has many friends here. Some of them sided with her.

"We purchased the railroad spur leading to the smelters. Now she wants the Pueblo to build its own smelter, adjoining the mine. I am under the impression you have been brought in to survey the practicality of this. Well and good, as far as we are concerned. But being close to the source of ore does not necessarily make a smelter practical. We will concede there is loss in shipping unprocessed ore south. The rates our road must charge to exist are a hardship on the mine. But we believe a smelter should not be located here, on the outskirts of Colfax. We believe it strongly enough to offer a gratuity of—say a thousand dollars—to an engineer who can appreciate the soundness of our arguments."

Young Arnold looked steadily at Bill. "A thousand dollars is a lot of money," he suggested.

"A lot of money," Nolan agreed softly. "It will buy a lot of goods—or a loft of grief!" He crossed to the door and opened it pointedly. "Better make sure which you're buying before you make an offer like that to a stranger again. Now, get out—both of you!"

Cyrus Arnold's beefy face turned apoplectic. "We're going to break this, Nolan—we're going to break it wide!" he warned angrily. "I've looked you up. You've got a good start. Is it worth risking for the two-bit fee those fool women and the deadheads of this valley can pay you?"

Nolan took a step forward, his lips flattening. The big man stepped hurriedly into the hall. Neil Arnold followed his father. He turned in the doorway. To this point his eyes had been dull and his face heavy with disinterest. Now a sullen light flamed up in them and his mouth pulled tight.

"There's another thing—between you and me, Nolan," he said harshly. "Zella told me about you. There'll be talk about us, and you'll hear it. But you'll stay clear. You keep away from her and you leave things alone or I'll see you finished!"

The intensity of this caution was startling. Nolan was jolted. Lifeless, gracefully useless as Neil Arnold appeared, there was one flame in him. Bill wasn't fool enough to ignore the man's earnestness.

"You better leave town in the morning," Cyrus said heavily. "If you don't—We've

got a man who can make talk you'll understand. You'll keep a civil tongue in your head or you'll stop talking when Jeff Hardin is in front of you. Converting stubborn fools is his business, and he's the best in his trade. He's handling the valley and he'll handle you—since you're taking the hard way!"

The Arnolds turned and moved down the hall. Nolan looked after them with a wry, twisted smile.

Jeff Hardin, eh? The Arnolds were due for a jolt. He had swept the table, this hand. But the deals would come faster now. And there were chips to come down at which he could only guess.

Nolan's smile tightened. He closed the door. And this time, he locked it.

NOLAN was shaving when the Mexican boy brought Medora Beckley to the door of his room the next morning. The woman watched him while he finished scraping the lather from his face.

"I've had to do a lot of chores in my time," she said thoughtfully. "Some of them were pretty cussed, and if I say so myself, I handled them right well. Reckon I might have got to thinking that I was nigh as capable as a man, all things considered. But that—" she gestured at the shaving kit—"that's something I never laid hands to. Which proves there's some things the best woman can't match against the worst man. Have any company last night?"

Nolan snorted through a towel.

"The town's best!" he growled. "A couple of puffer pigeons, trying to wear spurs!"

Medora Beckley grinned like a wicked boy. "The Arnolds!" she guessed. "I kind of thought that if I put you up here for the night you'd make their acquaintance. Seemed easier and a more convincing way for you to size up their stripe than being told by me. Might as well pack your bag, now. No need you keeping a room right in the enemy camp any longer. We'll go out to my place for breakfast. There's a friend out there you might want to see. Then we'll drive on over to the mine. There's a clean shack there with your work right to hand."

Nolan shrugged into his coat and grinned back at the woman. "A whiz on hunches, aren't you?" he gibed. "I don't do badly myself. My bag's all packed. Let's go!"

Medora Beckley laughed and led the way into the hall. She paused at the head of the stairs. "Uh—forgot to mention it. But there's a lad that might be looking for you, downstairs."

Nolan brushed back the skirt of his coat to expose the flat holster riding high on his hip.

"Hardin?" he hazarded. "I don't like to

talk much before breakfast. Or any time."

"Then don't!" Medora Beckley counseled. "Hardin won't give you a second chance to swing first on him!"

Nolan nodded. "Think he'll crowd us now?"

The woman shook her head. "Not to the limit, Bill. But he'll put some pressure on. I hear he had three loose teeth pulled this morning. He won't forget that. But he's got his orders, too. It would be easier for the Arnolds, right from the start, if they could swing you to their side. They won't crack down until they're sure you're our man. Walk easy, now!"

"Tiptoe," Nolan agreed.

They went down the stairs. The big lobby of the Aztec was empty. A man was lounging in the street doorway, apparently studying Beckie's buggy at the rail. He turned as Bill and the woman reached the bottom step. Jeff Hardin's face was discolored by a lumpy bruise. His eyes were sultry. But he crossed the lobby with a brisk step and thrust out his hand.

"I'm Jefferson Hardin, Nolan," he said in a controlled voice. "I understand you're here to consider smelter locations for the Pueblo Company. I have title to a piece of land which should interest you. Could you look at it this morning? Might save you a lot of time—a lot of time."

Nolan took the offered hand and stared at the man with exaggerated intentness. "Hardin?" he repeated. "Seems I should recognize you, but I don't. An accident, perhaps—?"

Dark color flooded Hardin's face. He withdrew his hand sharply. For a moment Bill thought the man's control would break. But there was iron in Hardin. The color receded and he shrugged coolly. "A pilgrim with his neck sticking out a foot got careless last night," he agreed. "He won't again. Now, about this property?"

"Miss Beckley has hired me. She owns my time."

Hardin swung toward the woman, thought better of the useless query he was about to make, and snapped a warning at Bill. "A man with the wrong kind of boss can get in a lot of trouble, Nolan!"

Bill nodded pleasantly. "That's right," he agreed. "I was thinking of that, Hardin, I met the Arnolds last night. I wouldn't want to work for them, not at all. I wouldn't want to come running at their whistle like a yellow dog with sharp teeth and no brains of my own. No— But I'll tell you what—when I'm ready to look at smelter sites, I'll remember you. Will you put the name down, Miss Beckley?"

Hardin growled a brittle oath without opening his teeth, and turned on his heel. Beckie and Nolan moved on through the door and

out into the street. As she settled back on the cushion of the buggy and shook out the lines, Medora Beckley spoke out of the corner of her mouth.

"And you call that tiptoe!" she marveled.

AS THE buggy rolled down the street, Nolan saw Hardin come out of the Aztec and pause on the walk. An idler to one side of the doorway shoved out and joined him. The two of them stepped down into the dust of the street and angled across toward the Geronimo Bar. Beckie saw Nolan's backward glance and spoke grimly.

"The other's Tal Barton," she said tersely. "The pot and the kettle; I don't know which is blackest. I'm a sorely tempted woman, Bill Nolan!"

Bill swung his attention to his companion in surprise. Beckie leaned forward, wrapping her lines about her strong little brown hands.

"I suppose I'm a meddler," she said thoughtfully. "Never saw a schoolteacher that wasn't. I've watched everybody in this valley grow up. I've wiped their noses and paddled their backsides and watched them marry and send more kids to me. Some of them, like Zella Warden and a few others, have meant more to me than the rest. But they're all mine. Sometimes I catch myself trying to claim the valley as mine, too."

Nolan nodded. He thought he understood. The Cochise was apt to do that to a person. Briefly as he had been here, he had felt it—a sort of proprietary, protective feeling—as though this valley was as perfect as it was because a person was willing to fight to keep it from harmful change.

"This copper mine—" Beckie went on—"it's brought us trouble and not much else. But that wasn't the idea. Baldy Baldridge found the lead nearly ten years ago—on a prospecting trip I'd grubstaked. Baldy had a bad chest. He was old. He got back in after a late storm, in a bad way. He knew he was going out. He gave me his location, made me promise I'd pass around whatever came of it where it would do the most good. Forming the Pueblo Mining Company seemed the best way. Valley folks bought up the stock. There wasn't much money. We opened the mine as best we could. Then water got into the shaft and it was costing money to ship the ore to the smelters down south over the road we'd built.

"Cyrus Arnold and his cash seemed a good answer. We were grateful when he bought up scattered dabs of stock. We even sold him a little out of the company reserves. And we were plain happy to turn the railroad over to him for a chunk of cash we could use to dry the mine and get things going again.

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Then he nearly doubled the freight rates and started out like a hungry wolf to buy control of the company. Maybe I shouldn't have fought him. Maybe I should have let him have it. Nobody else seemed much worried at first. But he wasn't a valley man and I was afraid of what he might do to the Cochise.

"You must have done a good job," Nolan said. "Arnold told me part of it—about Zella and her stock. I can guess at the rest. But now—what's this temptation business?"

Medora Beckley turned level, honest eyes toward Bill.

"You!" she said simply. "When Zella gave me your address she made me promise I wouldn't ask you to do more than to survey the mine and give us your opinion about the practicality of a smelter at the shaft. Zella knows the Arnolds. I think she's a little afraid of them, though her pride would never let her admit it. If she knew I'd deliberately put you up at the Aztec, that I'd let you knock some of Jefferson Hardin's teeth loose last night, she'd never forgive me. And now—well, I'd give the ten best years of my life—and I haven't lived them yet—to turn our fight against the Arnolds over to you, lock stock, and barrel!"

Nolan frowned.

"That's hardly my line—" he protested.

"You think it's mine?" Beckie asked tartly.

"At least you put Jeff Hardin away once. And that's an event in this valley! But I'm not asking you to take over. I made my promise to Zella. We'll have breakfast, then we'll go out to the mine, like I said. When you've had time to make your survey, we'll say good-bye. It's not what I want, Bill Nolan—but it'll have to do."

Beckie made the pattern pretty clear. As the buggy clipped along, Nolan turned the thing over in his mind. Cyrus Arnold and his son, with men like Hardin on their payroll, were grim adversaries for an old woman and her friends. It didn't make much difference whether the Pueblo Mine would ever be a producer or not. If the Arnolds could get control of the company, they would have broken the back of the valley people. They would, to all intents and purposes, be able to write their own ticket on subsequent developments in the Cochise. And there was enough undeveloped wealth here to make the stake worth while.

So this was what he'd walked into in order to see an old flame again! He wondered where Zella stood, now. She was engaged to Neil Arnold. That held. Arnold's unveiled threats were proof of it. Yet Zella was Beckie's friend.

Almost as though she were reading his thoughts, Medora Beckley spoke softly. "Zella is at my house, Bill. They let her go from her

job in the railroad office when she stuck with me on the matter of her stock in the Pueblo. It's been hard for her. You want to see her. I could feel that, even back at the station. I know it took more than the little fee I could offer to bring you out here. I hope you can help her. But I don't know how."

CHATER THREE

Colts, Copper, and Coffins!

ZELLA WARDEN was a tall girl; all clean, long lines. She had the kind of beauty a man hopes to find and seldom does—an evenness of feature and delicacy of coloring which in no way detracted from the strength apparent in her face and eyes. When Nolan swung down from Beckie's buggy to face her he found Zella not outwardly changed. There was change, it was deeply hidden. His eyes, he thought, were a little more somber perhaps. She offered her hand with quiet warm friendliness.

"Bill—" she said. "Bill!"

Medora Beckley left them standing like that and hurried on into the house. Nolan thought Beckie had winked at him as she turned away. He wasn't sure.

Zella had been down at the henyard. She had a lapful of eggs in her gathered apron. Bill helped her put them into a pail.

"This means a lot to Beckie, Bill," Zella told him, her eyes earnest. "It's good you could come."

"What does it mean to you?" Nolan asked bluntly.

Zella's gaze didn't flicker. "Nothing!"

"You're sticking with the Arnolds?"

The girl shook her head slowly. "I don't know," she said honestly. "Things have been different between Neil and me. Old Cyrus wants the valley—he wants it more than I think Neil wants a wife. I thought once Neil could do a lot for the valley, that I could help him. I see, now, that he can do nothing unless his dad agrees. . . . I told Neil that if he kept Jeff Hardin here any longer, we were through."

"Hardin's still here," Nolan said evenly. "I saw him in town this morning—and last night, too."

"That's your answer, then, isn't it?"

"No—but it looks like all I'll get, now!"

Zella laughed suddenly. Nolan had a glimpse of her again as he had known her: vivid, with a keen sense of the dramatic, making every instant of living an adventure.

"Poor you!" she mocked lightly. "But come on in. Beckie's made this breakfast an occasion. She's brought the mine down to you before you go up to it."

Zella opened the rear door of the house.

Bill stepped in to face a table set with a huge meal. Zella introduced him to the two other guests.

Emil Sehn, a grizzled, dry-humored veteran of burro-back trails, was the mine's powder man. Dan Riley, with powerful, bow-shaped shoulders and a fringe of short black whiskers from ear to ear along his square jaw, ran the shaft-house and the steam equipment. One chair at the table had no occupant.

"Gabe isn't here yet," Zella said. "Gabe Sanderson is the Pueblo's foreman, and Beckie's—" She paused and grinned wickedly.

Beckie let it pass. Her forehead was wrinkled with worry. "Gabe should be here, drat his slow carcass!" she said. "I saw him in town. He should have followed us right out. Well, sit—we won't wait."

Nolan slid into a chair beside Dan Riley. The two women went into the kitchen for the hot dishes. Riley winked at Bill.

"Might as well warn you, Nolan," he offered. "Engineer or no engineer, Beckie wouldn't stir a thing at the mine without Gabe's say-so. Solid quartz, that hombre—and a miner! He was the biggest kid in Beckie's first school-class in the valley. Folks say he's been in love with her ever since. She wouldn't have no truck with him in the beginning because she was a mite older'n him—not much, at that. Now they've both got so used to bein' cantankerous friends that it never goes past that, any more. But if Beckie runs the rest of us—and I admit she does, bless her—then Sanderson runs her."

The women came back to the table. Beckie had just dropped into her chair when the beat of an approaching rider, hammering at full gallop, clamored in the lane leading to the house. Beckie shoved up, bent at the window for a moment, and rushed for the door.

"It's Doc—Doc Stein!" she flung over her shoulder.

NOLAN was on the porch with the others when the rider swung down before the rail. He was a little man, grayed with dust and years of service. He wore a pair of tremendously thick-lensed glasses. His eyes seemed to float behind the lenses, and they were deeply troubled. He came up the steps heavily, his gaze fastened on Medora Beckley.

Beckie took a step toward him and stopped. "Gabe—" she said. "It's Gabe!"

Doc Stein nodded. "He never even felt it, Beckie," he said gently.

Something prodded Nolan. He stepped forward. "An accident, Doctor?"

Doc Stein turned curious eyes toward him. A small, incredibly scornful smile jerked the corners of his tired mouth upward. The smile snake volumes before the lips parted. It

mocked the outlander who thought Gabe Sanderson could be killed by any accident.

"A gunshot—between the eyes!" he said hoarsely. "Call it an accident. Maybe you'll get away with it. I reckon Neil Arnold will!"

"Neil!" Zella Warden's face was without color.

"Neil Arnold," the little doctor repeated savagely. "Him and Barton and Jeff Hardin had been in the Geronimo ever since it opened this morning. Barton and Hardin were sober. But somebody said Arnold had got a jolt last night, and he was drunk. Plenty drunk. The three of them bumped into Gabe. There was words. They got around to you, Beckie. You know Gabe. He swung on Arnold. There was a tangle. Folks that seen it couldn't figure out just what happened. But when the dust cleared, Gabe was down—dead. And Neil's gun was the only one with a fired chamber. Ed Clay's got him locked up till he's sober enough to tell his side of it. And the old man's tearin' Colfax up by the roots because his son is behind bars. I'd feel better if they both were underground! Is that coffee I smell?"

"Pot's on the stove, Doc," Medora Beckley said dully. "Buggy's out back. I'll go right in—"

The two women moved woodenly back into the house. Nolan saw that both were stunned, that he could help neither of them now. He moved to the far end of the porch and built a smoke. Dan Riley and Emil Sehn followed him. The huge, red-faced Scandinavian looked at his cracked fingernails.

"This does it!" he breathed. "This'll bust her back!"

Dan Riley nodded darkly. "Gabe—with a slug between his eyes! I reckon we're done."

Nolan sucked in a lungful of smoke. "Sanderson meant that much?" he asked softly. "You think Miss Beckley won't fight any more?"

Riley looked up in surprise.

"Won't fight? Why hell, man, Beckie'll fight while her coffin's going into the ground! But Gabe meant everything, up at the shaft. The Arnolds have been crowding every way they could. Gabe kept the crew on up there because they were more afraid of him than they were of Jeff Hardin and Barton, and that crowd. Gabe browbeat 'em and buffaloed 'em and treated 'em square at the same time. They'd have fought the devil for him. But when word gets to the shaft that he's gone, there won't be a mucker in the hole in an hour. We're done—for lack of a mine-boss!"

Nolan pinched out his cigarette. "Best thing, then," he suggested quietly, "is to see word doesn't get to the mine for a while."

Emil Sehn's mobile, colorless brows dropped heavily over his eyes and then climbed.

"By thunder, we can do that!" he agreed solidly.

Riley caught Nolan's arm. "They's two kinds of engineers," he said swiftly, "and I'm a man as knows. I've spit in the eye of both kinds. One works on paper and the other knows how to beat a shillelagh-song out'n a pick. Which are you?"

Bill saw what the hoist-man was driving at. He grinned wryly. "Let's find out," he said gently.

Riley spat on his hands. "Gabe, boy—" he murmured—"mebbe we'll square for you yet!"

THE PUEBLO copper lead was in a shoulder outcropping on a bald hill terminating the northern end of the Cochise. It was about six miles above Medora Beckley's little farm and nearly ten from Colfax. Riding between Sehn and Dan Riley, Nolan studied the surface buildings as they approached.

The structures all appeared in good repair, the gear well-kept. Riley's flat statement that Gabe Sanderson was a miner appeared true. Nolan liked the orderliness of the plant. His eyes measured grades and the slope of the hill. Offhand, he judged that a site just below the shaft-house would be an excellent location for a medium-capacity mill and smelter.

He had already made up his mind about Medora Beckley's plan to build a reduction plant in the valley. The freight boosts which the Arnolds had clamped on made such a move imperative, if the mine was to survive. Ingot metal could be shipped at a profit when transportation of raw ore was entirely out of the question.

It remained only to determine if the grade and quantity of the Pueblo ore was worth the development; that and whether the mine could be kept in operation.

As he rode in to the base of the shaft-house with his two companions, a file of men started pouring out of the building. A lift had apparently come up from below with a cargo of miners. Among the leaders Nolan saw the man who had been lounging beside the door of the Aztec that morning in town; Tal Barton, Beckie had called him. Riley saw the man at the same time.

"Black devil!" the steam man growled. "We're too late, Nolan!"

Bill swung down. "Maybe," he agreed briefly.

The miners were ringing around Barton. Nolan saw that they had already been told of Gabe Sanderson's death. And the measure of the mine foreman was in the deep look of regret and shock on most of the rough, silent faces.

Barton was talking to the crowd. "It's a lost hope, boys. Don't be fools. Lay off—

let things take a rest. Let it quiet down. Arnold aims to open a real mine here. Then there'll be real jobs and plenty of work. Gabe's kept it going up to now, but Gabe's gone. And you all know that a woman can't claw copper out of the ground. Close 'er down. Quit bucking. You don't want none of the trouble Gabe got!"

Barton was cocksure, scornfully dominant. He was swinging a blacksnake, and he knew it.

Nolan shoved forward. A miner spotted him and turned. Barton swung also. His eyes chilled, then brightened with cleverness. "Here comes help!" he gibed. "This is what old Beckie's sunk to dragging in as a last hope. Take a look at it. An engineer, by hell! A fancy-pants dude. That's what she's got left to put in Gabe Sanderson's place!"

A miner growled. There was a sullen air to the rest of them. Most engineers would not have understood, but Nolan had worked in shafts to grind out the cash he needed for his degree. He knew miners. He knew their hatred of book-men who claimed to know more about the dark guts of the earth than men like themselves, who had spent a lifetime underground.

Riley pressed close to him. "You've got to grab 'em now, son—and I can't help you; nor Emil, much as we'd like!"

Nolan nodded. He kept on until he was a yard from Barton. He looked steadily at the man. "You don't look like a miner, friend," he said quietly. "I doubt if you know as much about this shaft as you seem to think. My name is Bill Nolan, and I aim to keep this shaft running!"

Barton ran insolent eyes over him. The lights in them fined down. Bill recognized the signal. Barton was measuring him. He was thinking that he was a bigger man than Jess Hardin, and that a demonstration of this dude's shortcomings, right now, would clinch his arguments with the hesitant miners.

"I'm Tal Barton, Nolan—" he said off-handedly. And he thrust out one powerful, long-fingered hand as though in greeting.

Nolan grinned. It was an old trick. He saw Barton's shoulder-muscles tensing under his shirt. Back of him, Emil Sehn grunted what might have been a warning. Bill stabbed his own hand out. Barton shaped his grip carelessly, certain of himself. And that was a mistake.

WHEN the hands were on the point of meeting, Bill's fingers closed like the fangs of a striking snake. The muscles of his forearm bulged until the sleeve of his jacket was tight over them. Blood was pressed back from his gripping knuckles. Barton also clamped down. But he was an instant too

slow, and Nolan's grip was set. And it was sure.

For a long, breathless moment the big man fought to equalize the pressure of Bill's clamping fingers. But his joints were cramped, confined. A murderous haze swept his eyes; there was no other change of expression. Nolan began to pump his hand as though in friendly shake and, as he did so, he rocked his wrist, grinding the vise clamped on the other's fingers deeper into agonized flesh.

Barton's forehead dampened with sweat. He fought hard against betraying pain. But Bill kept on grinding. The man finally winced a little, then stepped aside and changed his balance to ease himself.

The grip had served its purpose. The miners had seen that here was a dude who not only was not afraid of Jeff Hardin's Number One man, but had calmly bent his fingers up in a man-to-man handshake. A fool business, like kids might devise. But effective with miners. They understood fundamentals. a man had guts only if they saw it proved.

But Nolan wasn't satisfied. Watching Barton's face, he knew the man's fury would drive him on. Barton wouldn't take this and step back. When that crushed hand was freed, he'd charge like a flagged bull.

Bill pulled hard and without warning, drawing Barton toward him. At the same time, he loosened his fingers. Barton staggered under the sudden pull, realized what was coming, and swiped awkwardly at Bill's face. The blow brushed Nolan's mouth, bringing a little blood to his lip. But the man was completely off balance and as he came within reach, Nolan rifled his left hand forward in a short, terribly jolting jab.

The blow caught Barton in the V of his lower ribs. He grunted in agony, sucked helplessly for the wind driven from him, and slumped to the ground. He was not flattened completely, as Bill had hoped—Barton was big and hard, and he clung doggedly to consciousness. But the pain and the shock of the blow made him sick. He lay on his face, his fingers clawing in the grass and his body racked with painful retching.

Nolan stepped back. "Riley, have a couple of the boys put this carcass on a horse and start it back to town," he snapped. "The rest of you—listen to me! Sanderson was prodded into a fight, by three men in town this morning. All three of them wore guns. One of those guns cut Gabe down. Nobody knows which one yet—for sure. But this gotch-eared moose was one of those three!

"Take his advice if you like. He said it was healthiest. Or take mine: start that cage hauling muck!"

At a nod from Riley, two men shuffled forward, lifted Barton, and dumped him un-

ceremoniously down the tailings-pile, at the foot of which he had left his horse. Riley ducked into the shaft-house and came out with a rifle. Cradling it across his arms, he stood atop the tailings, watching Barton claw up into saddle and turn sullenly toward Colfax. Emil Sehn pushed in among the miners.

"Beckie's been doing our fighting for years!" he rumbled. "It's time we did some for her. It ain't her mine—it's ours! And if a 'dude engineer' can fold Tal Barton like that, what can hair-chested men like us do—eh?"

There was a wry, self-mocking note in Sehn's voice and the way he said "dude engineer" which struck the Pueblo crew just right. They were sheepish at having been buffaloed by a strong-arm who had collapsed in the hands of a stranger. They laughed—and they were laughing at themselves.

Nolan eased. He was over the first hump. He didn't know how far these men would go with him, but he knew that they would now keep the Pueblo producing.

The crew started to move back toward the shaft. Nolan thought about Arnold and Jeff Hardin—and Barton. The next move was checked to them. He signaled Sehn. Emil crossed to him.

"Watch your powder close. Keep it accounted for all of the time. And keep a guard over it. When you're off, see the best man you've got is on!"

Sehn looked startled, puzzled, then comprehending—all in swift succession. He nodded grimly. "I'll keep my powder, all right!" he promised.

Nolan turned, to see Riley moving toward him, rifle still in hand. On the flats below the mine, Tal Barton was jogging heavily off down the track to Colfax.

"Show me around, Dan," Bill invited. "If I'm bossing this hole, I better know what's under the roots."

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder's Mine

IT WAS DARK when Nolan reached the surface again. He had put in a long, thorough day, and he had learned all he needed to know.

The Pueblo lead was rich ore. The mine had, beyond doubt barely tapped the vast ore-body lying under the barren hills heading the valley. The shaft could produce a fortune if it were developed—enough money to repay richly every stockholder. And Beckie's plan of building a reduction plant on the mine property was highly practical.

Emil Sehn met Riley and Nolan at the cage stop in the shaft-house. He shot them

a quick, curious look. Riley shrugged. "Ask Nolan," he said wearily. "He's had me tramping drifts and sampling facings and trotting out sketches till I'm wore to my insoles. But he ain't said a word!"

"How about it, Nolan?" the powder man wanted to know. "Do we let go?"

Nolan shook his head. His full report would mean a lot to Sehn and Riley and the others who had worked with Medora Beckley to keep the mine going, to see it developed. But he didn't think that now was a good time to reveal all he had discovered in this day underground.

If the Arnolds learned that the valley had discovered what they probably already knew about the possibilities at the Pueblo, it might force their hand. And until he knew the situation better, until he could guess ahead at what moves the Arnolds might make, Nolan didn't want to press the situation.

"There's a lot of rock down there," he told Emil noncommittally. "Maybe we'll find something when I've had a chance to work out my notes and make some calculations."

The powder man shrugged. "Damn shame we can't take something good back with us tonight," he said heavily. "One of the boys was up the hill a while ago—you can see Beckie's place from there. He says lights are up. Reckon we'd better drift down that way. She might need us."

Nolan doubted Medora Beckley needed the help of either himself or his two companions, in the way Sehn meant. The powder man was thinking that she would need comfort—and Bill thought he knew Beckie perhaps even better than these old friends. She might need their backs, their abilities, and the steadiness of their faith. But where the need was for comfort, Medora Beckley had a well-spring of courage which would carry her through any loss.

However, he was anxious to get back to the little farm. Beckie and Zella had been in town; and he had an urgent curiosity as to what had happened today in Colfax—from two angles, both of which had apparently been overlooked by Riley and Emil Sehn.

The first, because it was still the closest to him, was what effect Neil Arnold's involvement in Sanderson's death would have on Zella. To date, her loyalty to her fiance might have made her pretend that all the pressure on the Pueblo Company had sprung from old Cyrus Arnold. But Cyrus had not been among the three men, one of whom had killed Gabe Sanderson. Neil had.

The other curiosity had to do with Neil Arnold himself. The man did not appear to have the kind of sand necessary to shoot another man down on an open street in full daylight. Even if he were crazed with drink,

Nolan was convinced such recklessness was beyond Arnold. This being true, the one conclusion left was that either Barton or Jeff Hardin had fired the shot which dropped Sanderson. And there was something funny about it.

Hardin and Barton, one the boss and the other a lieutenant, were both in Cyrus Arnold's hire. It was queer that either Barton or Hardin would gun down Sanderson at a time and under circumstances which would pin guilt for the killing either on one of them—or on the son of the man for whom they worked.

What Nolan wanted to know—and badly—was how old man Arnold had taken this; what defense Neil had put up when he sobered. Nolan had a definite feeling that something was wrong in the enemy camp.

DOC STEIN had come back out with the two women from town. He had put Beckie to bed and was sitting in the living room with Zella when Nolan and his two companions arrived. Riley and Emil Sehn, free now to discuss the details of Sanderson's death and the temper of things generally in Colfax today, cornered the doctor. Zella stood up and moved out onto the porch. Nolan saw that it was an invitation, and he followed her.

It had been a hard day for the two women, Bill sensed. Yet Zella seemed relieved of some great weight. She turned at the rail, a vibrant silhouette in the moonlight.

"I know, Bill, why you accepted Beckie's offer and came out here," she said. "It would be foolish not to admit it. But that's not why I'm telling you what I'm going to. It's because you're an old friend and because you didn't let Beckie feel that she was left alone, today. I saw Neil this afternoon. His father got to Ed Clay and made big talk. Maybe he waved some bills in Ed's face. I don't know. Maybe Ed's just paying out rope to see if somebody in Colfax won't hang himself. Maybe he knows, like I do, that Neil wasn't holding the gun that shot Gabe. Anyway, Ed and the coroner got together and agreed Gabe had been killed by persons unknown, the killer acting in self-defense. Neil had a black eye where Gabe hit him as evidence. They used that to whitewash the whole thing. And Clay turned Neil loose."

"I had the Arnold diamond, Bill—had it for a year. But I gave it back, in front of old Cyrus. I've been storing up a lot. I gave that back, too. The slate is clean, Bill—and it wasn't washed with tears."

Nolan lifted one of Zella's hands and pressed it. Words would be out of place here. A gesture more personal than the handclasp would be resented. Off with the old and on

with the new was not Zella's nature. He turned the conversation away from themselves. That could wait. It had already waited a long time.

"How did Colfax take the coroner's verdict?" he asked. "There must be some old-timers in town that Arnold hasn't bought or bullied, yet."

Zella frowned. "They took it funny, Bill. They didn't make much noise. They didn't talk much. But I don't think Neil or his dad or anybody else in the Aztec are going to sleep much tonight. Gabe was well liked."

"Old Cyrus do much bellowing about the shooting?"

"No—" Zella paused uncertainly. "That was funny, too. I've seen him bully men twice as good as him. But he didn't bully, today. He acted a little afraid—"

"Of what?"

The girl shrugged.

"You'll think this is silly, but I think Cyrus is afraid of Jeff Hardin!"

Nolan pursed his lips thoughtfully. This was a possibility he had not considered. On the face of it, Zella's hunch was ridiculous. But the more Bill thought of it, the more he was inclined to agree with her.

"Why?" he asked bluntly.

"I don't know," the girl said slowly. "Unless, maybe, it's that Jeff Hardin is willing to play for more reckless stakes than either Neil or his dad can stomach. Whatever it is, Cyrus must have known Neil as well as I do; he must have known right from the start that Neil couldn't shoot a rabbit, drunk or sober. But he let a murder charge stand against his son for half a day without making a single effort to hang it on Tal Barton or Hardin."

"He got Neil from behind bars. Maybe he figured that was enough," Bill suggested.

"Cyrus is no fool," Zella countered. "He must have felt the tension in town, just as I did. He must have known that free or in jail, Gabe's murderer would be in danger. But he didn't do anything about relieving Neil of that!"

Nolan frowned. He had a definite feeling that Zella was on the track of something. But he couldn't put his finger on any possible wedge which Hardin could use against his boss.

He lifted his head to ask another question, then stopped. Zella had stiffened and was turned toward the main road, listening. Buggy wheels were rattling into the night. Bill went over the rail. A man turned the buggy into Beckie's lane at a suicidal speed. The off hubs crashed against a rail of Beckie's fence. The vehicle righted and raced on toward the house.

Nolan stepped down into the yard, Zella beside him. The buggy careened to a stop and a man climbed unsteadily from it. He straight-

ened. The moonlight flooded Cyrus Arnold's face. Its florid color was gone. His eyes were glazed, his chest heaving as though he had run the distance from town afoot.

"Miss Beckley!" he wheezed. "I've got to see Miss Beckley!"

Bill spoke quietly. "She's had enough of you for one day, Arnold! She's sleeping; we won't waken her."

Arnold pinned his gaze on Bill. "Who's that—Nolan, eh? You'll do. But for the love of heaven, man, don't interrupt. Listen, listen close. Time's almighty short—"

CYRUS ARNOLD fought for breath.

"I've put money in this valley—I've tried to help. Now the valley's got to help me!" he said frantically. "The devil's loose in town and my life isn't worth a nickel!"

"That," Nolan agreed tightly, "is God's truth."

Arnold waved his hand. "A mob broke into the Aztec half an hour ago. They took my son out into the street and hanged him to the flagpole on the station. I could hear him screaming from the bottom of my closet!"

A shudder shook the man. Disgust ran through Nolan—disgust and pity. He spoke over his shoulder at Zella, white-faced behind him. "Sneak in the back way and see if Beckie hasn't got some whisky on a kitchen shelf—"

The girl vanished in the darkness. Nolan swung back to Arnold. "Who headed the mob?"

"Hardin!" Arnold whimpered.

Nolan bore down, hard. "Hardin, eh? And he's your man. Then you hanged your own son!"

Arnold raised stricken eyes. "You don't understand, Nolan," he begged hoarsely. "Hardin was my man when he came in here. But he crowded me off to one side. He made me pay him with what stock I'd been able to pick up in the Pueblo Company. Next to Miss Beckley and Zella, he's got the biggest block in the valley, now. He wants that mine. He aims to get it. He warned me to get out of his way."

"But I didn't know how big his plans were. He shot Gabe Sanderson today and pinned it on Neil. When I talked the sheriff into seeing a reasonable doubt of Neil's guilt, Hardin laughed at me. He wanted a goat, he said, and Neil was it. *Still* I didn't understand. But I do, now!"

Zella was back with a bottle. Nolan pressed it into Arnold's hand and forced the man to breathe down a stout drink. It seemed to stiffen him.

"That mob's just a blind, in town. It took care of Neil. It'll wreck our offices. It'll run me out if I stick my head in there again. But

Hardin's got Tal Barton with him and about ten or twelve others that want his kind of money and will do his kind of work. He's after me. When I'm out of the way, he'll go after the mine. When he's through up there, not a miner in the country will go near the Pueblo. The property will sit until Miss Beckley and the rest of them here in the valley are frozen out and will have to sell their holding. He'll buy them up, then, and he'll move it. He'll have what he wants. Do something, Nolan—do something, for the love of God, before it's too late!"

There was a sudden silence. Zella Warden spoke calmly through it. "Sounds like it might be, already—"

Hoof-thunder was beating up the road. A black mass of riders turned into the lane.

Nolan spoke swiftly to Zella again. "This may be the town crowd; it may be strictly Hardin's bunch. Slip inside. Warn Doc and Dan Riley and Emil what's coming. But don't rouse Beckie if you can help it. We'll try to handle it quietly."

Zella turned away. Cyrus Arnold moved up against the rail of the porch and crouched there helplessly, his eyes pleadingly on Nolan. The horsemen came on, plowed into the yard, and stopped in a grim circle, facing the porch. Bill saw Barton and Jeff Hardin and three or four others he thought were members of their crew among the crowd. The rest appeared to be legitimate townsmen, most of them packing a little more liquor than they could hold and fired up with the one execution they had already carried off tonight. He braced himself in an effort to hold them. But before he could speak, a calm voice reached out into the night from behind him.

"Are you looking for me?"

MEDORA BECKLEY had come out through the front door, wrapped in a thick kimono, her hair in disarray. But her figure was stiff and straight and her eyes flashing. One or two men in the crowd stirred uneasily. A sullen voice answered her. "We want Arnold!"

"What for?"

"We're going to hang the pot-bellied son!" Nolan thought this voice was one of Hardin's men. It had a brittle ring which caught hold in the crowd. The uneasiness vanished.

"Go on back to bed, Beckie," a more kindly voice advised. "This is our job. We'll finish it. You've had enough of it, already. The Arnolds killed Gabe; one with lead and the other with orders. We'll clean the slate tonight!"

"Come out, Arnold—or we'll come after you!"

Beckie swung toward this new voice. Her own tone was frigid, scornful. "That's big

talk, Jefferson Hardin!" she mocked. "But this is my house. If you want Mister Arnold, suppose you do come after him!"

Hardin, who had been standing well back in the crowd, moved insolently forward. Nolan tightened up and glanced at Dan and Emil, on the porch, but he couldn't make up his mind whether Hardin's move was purposeful or merely bravado. Before he could decide, Cyrus Arnold straightened. The railroad owner appeared to have no doubts. He appeared to believe Hardin meant what he said. A kind of recklessness seemed to settle in his paunchy body. He stepped abruptly away from the porch and headed toward the crowd.

He walked unsteadily and in mortal fear, but there was suddenly an aura of courage about him. It spoke more plainly than words would possibly have done. Driven to an extremity, a change had been worked in the man. Maybe he wanted to leave at the last one good gesture. But his carriage said plainly that Medora Beckley had come to enough grief at his hands. He would have no violence at her house on his account.

Powerless to stop the man, Nolan watched fixedly. Arnold seemed unable to see clearly. He moved away from the house on an angle slightly oblique to the waiting crowd. He stumbled over an irregularity in the level of the yard and lurched on. Jeff Hardin, well out in front, watched him with an unreadable face. Nolan felt the same sympathy he suddenly knew for Arnold begin to run also through the men from town. Then, when the man was entirely in the open and half the distance to his waiting judges, Hardin drew one gun with an easy, fluid motion and fired.

Arnold's uneven, lurching progress stopped. He rocked on his feet in dazed surprise for an instant. He turned slowly, almost as though he was trying to apologize to Beckie, on the porch. Then he fell heavily. Hardin replaced his weapon and turned easily to the crowd.

"See that?" he asked coldly. "The old son was edgin' away—getting ready to make a break. He'd have been running for the shadows in a minute!"

Barton caught up the cue. "Well, reckon that winds up the show. Better take him back to town so's Doc can get 'em both ready for planting tomorrow—"

A mutter went through the crowd. Nolan saw sickness in faces which had been glowering seconds before. Hardin ran his eyes over the townsmen, and the mutter died. Hardin chuckled and tipped his head at Barton. The bigger man started moving through the crowd, and as he moved, he culled out others of his own kind.

Moving suddenly, as though released from a spell, Nolan wheeled and slid to the edge

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DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

of the porch, just below Dan Riley and Emil Sehn. "Get out back and get three horses ready!" he whispered tensely. "Maybe some of them are going back to town—but Hardin's going on to the mine. We've got to head him off. If we don't, it'll be a long day before anybody works that shaft!"

Riley slid along the wall to the dark end of the porch and dropped over the rail. Beckie was already out in the yard, crouched down beside Arnold's body. Zella was moving toward her. Bill caught her attention. The girl swung and moved in beside him.

"Keep things going here," Bill ordered.

The girl nodded and veered on toward Beckie. Flattened against the wall, Nolan edged around a corner and sprinted for the rear yard. Dan and Emil were fumbling with girths and cinches among the animals racked outside the corral. The reins of one mount were pressed into Nolan's hand. As he swung up, he heard a knot of men detach themselves from the crowd still milling uneasily out front, and go hammering off up the road.

"If you know a back way and a short cut," he growled at the other two, "take it. I'll stick if my saddle does!"

CHAPTER FIVE

'Ware Powder!

RILEY and Sehn knew a back way but it was no short cut. Dan admitted as much.

"Hardin'll beat us to the mine, hand-running—if you're sure that's where he's headed," he bellowed between the reaching jumps of his horse. "But this way we can get to the shaft unseen."

"Good enough!" Nolan answered. "Listen close. Get into the shaft house, Dan. Take Emil with you if you need him. Get control of the hoist and keep it! Can you?"

Riley grinned. Leaning back in his saddle with one hand to the reins, he clawed a long gun from his belt.

"Can I?" he mimicked. "I've got the tools! But how about you?"

"I'm going underground," Nolan said shortly. "That's where the hell will be!"

The three of them hammered on in silence, making heavy going of the ridge shoulders. Nolan's mind was working systematically. He had crowded everything out of it except the Pueblo shaft—and Jeff Hardin. He had crowded out Medora Beckley and her long fight to keep the Pueblo for the valley. He had crowded out Cyrus Arnold and his son and the swift retribution which had struck them in payment for their cupidity and planning. He had crowded out even Zella and his

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own tenuous place in the sudden holocaust which had blossomed in the Cochise. There was only the mine—and Hardin.

It wasn't hard to figure, now. Cyrus Arnold had cleared up much which had been puzzling before. Hardin was completely ruthless. Hired to further Arnold's plans, he had seen greater profits on his own hook. With calm cunning, he had used Arnold's efforts so long as they would serve his own plans. When Arnold had reached the end of his rope and failed him Hardin had struck out boldly on his own.

With the valley intimidated by his violence and with a portion of the ownership of the Pueblo in his hands, Hardin's next move was obvious to Nolan. He would strike at the mine. His intent would be to shut down the plant, but not to work permanent damage to an investment which he eventually aimed to own. If he could get underground and do enough damage to stop the operation of the mine for a season, Hardin would succeed. The valley people—even oak-hearted old Beckie—had about reached the limit of the grief they could take from the mine. A protracted shut-down would complete their discouragement. They would sell out—even to a man like Hardin—after one more blow. And being an engineer who understood shafts which were in the ground as well as he understood those which were still on paper, Nolan believed he knew where Hardin would strike.

The horses of Hardin's party were grouped about the foot of the shaft-house; the main group of the raiders were not in sight. Nolan spotted a surface guard at the head of the tailings pile. The others must already have gone underground. He judged another guard was at the controls in the shaft-house.

Emil Sehn slid from saddle. He started circling swiftly and silently toward the guard on the tailings. Dan Riley, with the directness of his race, drove straight for the shaft-house. Nolan headed at a soft run toward the platform at the mouth of the slanting hole.

One thing puzzled him. None of the skeleton night crew of the mine were on the surface. Nolan hadn't figured this. He had thought Hardin would bring them out, first thing. It troubled him. Was Hardin expecting trouble with the crew and so was planning to jump them underground, or had he completely discounted the miners in planning his attack?

THE shaft of the Pueblo had been dug by veteran hard-rock men who still had a stubborn distrust of mechanical power. A ladder descended the smooth wall, just outside the guide-rails for the cage—a precaution for men underground against cable failures and boiler



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trouble. He was very grateful for the ladder.

Lights were winking and bobbing at the foot of the shaft. He made the last hundred feet carefully, only to discover that the lights were reflections, that Hardin was at work thirty or forty feet beyond in the drift. Nolan lowered his feet from the ladder to the floor of the drift and peered cautiously. For a moment he couldn't understand what he saw. Then it snapped into focus.

Hardin's men were drawn up in a line across the drift, backing slowly toward the shaft and the avenue of escape it offered. As they walked one of them was unreeling a length of fuse. The other end of the fuse was imbedded in a 'dobe shot of dynamite plastered against the wall of the drift. It wasn't a big shot—just about enough. It would have a terrific shattering effect on the local section of the wall to which it was plastered with mud—enough to bring down six or eight feet of wall and undoubtedly block the drift tight. From the shaft side, it would look like a bad cave-in. Actually it would be something which could be cleared in a couple of days with a good crew.

Beyond this shot, their lights winking, held at bay by guns among Hardin's men, was the night crew of the Pueblo.

Hardin was going to seal the crew in the drift!

The utter ruthlessness of the man's scheme set Nolan's teeth on edge. If he got away from the Pueblo without being seen from the outside, Hardin could claim complete innocence of the blast here, and make it stick. And the fact that the Pueblo had claimed the lives of this crew would hasten the valley's inclination to unload its claims to the shaft.

As Nolan watched, one of the miners in the crew, unable longer to face the prospect of entombment, lunged desperately forward. Hardin snapped a short command. A gun rocked the confined air of the drift. The running miner broke stride and slid to motionlessness on his face. Nolan saw a similar tightening among others in the crew. He flung his voice down the drift. "Easy, boys! There's another way!"

Hardin and two or three others wheeled. Fully aware that he was covered, Nolan advanced slowly. Hardin waited for him on spraddled legs.

"Knocked off the guards outside, eh, Nolan?" he asked softly. Bill nodded.

"Like you did the man at the powder shed and the hoistman, Hardin!" he agreed. "We can play rough, too!"

A slow smile twisted Hardin's face.

"No more, bucko!" he promised, and he pointed at the tight bunch of miners beyond

Wanted—Single-Jack Fighting Men!

the plastered shot. "Start moving. You draw the same ticket—and a lot more company than you deserve!"

The man with the fuse reached the end of the length he had been unreeling. It lay along the floor of the drift like a black snake leading to the 'dobe charge. Hardin snapped a match alight and eared back the hammer of the gun in his hand.

"Run a race, Nolan," he mocked. "Get past that charge before the fire reaches it, or you'll get a slug in the back of the head. And I'll nail you flat if you try to stomp that fuse!"

Bending, Hardin touched the fuse alight. It sputtered, smoked blackly for an instant, and started to burn steadily. It was fast fuse, Nolan saw—better than a foot a second. As though that sputtering point of fire was drawing him, he started forward, toward the doomed miners. One of them warned him back hoarsely. "Don't do it, Boss! A bullet's better than what we'll get when the wall comes down and our air's cut off!"

Nolan kept on. His eyes were on the fuse. He knew how fast it was burning. He knew that 'dobe shots lost most of their power if they were loosely laid or were shaken loose before they fired. He knew, also, that men unfamiliar with powder feared it unduly. Out of these things, and these alone, he had to work a miracle.

The fuse burned and he matched pace with it, measuring . . . measuring. . .

Behind him he was aware of Hardin's gun leveled at him.

THE distance was halved. Nolan's fingers cramped to reach, to make his play. Still he moved, for another second, as though he were resigned to death. Then, with all the whiplash speed he could muster and with the fuse already burning into the mud plastering the charge, he snatched at the bulky wad of plastering and gelatin. Hardin and his men were already cringing against the end wall of the drift, against the concussion to come. Hardin's gun was forgotten for the instant.

Nolan's fingers clamped tight. He jerked the soppy bundle from the wall, spun, and heaved it clumsily up the drift toward Hardin and his men.

It seemed to Bill that he had miscalculated, after all, that he had cut the edge too fine. Then he saw the brilliant white flash of the charge. And the impact came. Standing erect as he was, it hit him savagely—like a swinging maul hitting every square inch of his body at the same time. It flung him down, stunned him. He clawed to his knees, and bawled at the stunned miners behind him. "Get 'em—get the sons—every one of 'em!"

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DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

Not knowing whether the crew was following or not and not caring, he staggered into the foot of the shaft. His uncertain feet stumbled across a man's body. Off-balance, he plunged into another, still upright. This one swore wildly, sobbed like an hysterical woman, and tried to tear away. Nolan was dragged across another fallen body, but he clung on.

He realized, now, that the charge he had thrown had traveled farther than he thought. It must nearly have reached the raiding crew. It must have blown some of them to rags—but not Jeff Hardin. The man was indestructible. This swearing, sobbing, fighting madman in his grip was Hardin.

A gun fired recklessly, muffled and close. Fists beat against Nolan's face, his body. Nails gouged and tore. He clung grimly, working his hands from arms to shoulders, from shoulders to neck. Somewhere they fell into a grip which permitted his fingers to interlock. He held on, then, weary, slipping into a daze, and content to rest without further effort. His fingers cramped. He knew his locked grip was mercilessly tight. The man in his hands erupted in a frenzy of effort, subsided suddenly, and slumped to the floor. Bill Nolan fell to the floor with him, his grip unbroken.

* * *

Somebody tried to raise him. Somebody else pried his fingers apart with professional skill. Nolan fought with his head, steadying himself. There were a lot of lights at the foot of the shaft. There was a lot of talk, an awed murmur. The cage, which Hardin had sent to the top to save it from possible harm, was back down. Emil Sehn was down. Doc Stein was down. Beckie was down.

There were dead men on the floor. They were not pretty. But they were not Pueblo men. Nobody looked at them. Nobody looked at Hardin's body.

Beckie's color was gone. But her eyes burned again with the fearless fire which had attracted Nolan when he first faced her.

"You've done a mighty tolerable job for us, Bill Nolan," she said, "and one worth a sight more'n we can pay. Reckon we'll have to work it out—"

Bill wasn't paying much attention to Beckie. He was thinking that something was missing. Then he saw her. She was beside him. It was her arm on which he was leaning.

He was thinking that the Pueblo was a rich property. Its development would require a good engineer— Then Zella turned her face toward him. He bent awkwardly.

"To hell with the mine!" he said clearly and distinctly.

THE END

TENSLEEP—ONE-DAY DEPUTY

(Continued from page 57)

"Well, I'm damned," he swears, an' moves to 'rds me. "You mean you an' him ain't posted? Get over there, you fool. Get set to blow 'em over when they—" He's in easy range. My arm swings. The muzzle of my gun buries itself in his skull. He sinks with a low moan. Here's one gunstick I won't have to outdraw—or anybody else, ever again.

"Come on, Hobbs," I whisper, an' wait till he comes up.

"Who's that?" he asks, looking' at the body.

"Lintback Avon, Hobbs. A murderin' little gunstick."

"He's nobody I'd ever o' let wear a deputy's badge," he says, defensively.

"Bridgely's in the bank, Hobbs, an' I'm goin' in after him. You slip up an' get your ear to the window. An' watch behind you."

He grunts an' I head for the window, which is propped open with a short stick. I threw a leg over the sill an' let myself in, silent as a ghost. Cripes, but it's black. I take three careful steps, feelin' my way. A voice says, "Here they come, Lint. On your toes."

I grunt "Uh-huh," an' shrink against the wall an' go to my knees as a key rattles in the front door. The panel swings, creakin'ly. Bootsteps. The deep bass of one of the Huckabey twins says, "Take it easy, Barlow; do as you're told an' you won't get hurt. Open up that vault."

CREAK of a swinging door leading behind a counter. Somebody scratches a match an' I see Bridgely putting light to a candlewick as he kneels before the vault. The tiny beam falls on Barlow's frightened face as he comes to a halt. Behind him are the Huckabeyes an' two other hard gents I haven't seen. Barlow says, "You—Greg? Great God, what does this mean?"

"Quit moaning, Barlow, an' get the safe open. Move, damn you!"

"My poor little Betty," groans the banker an' fairly leaps to the vault. He's so scared he has trouble enterin' the key, but finally the iron door swings open. The Huckabeyes an' the other pair rush in with tow bags. Bridgely's gun is out an' Barlow's eyes are big as saucers as he stares into the big muzzle.

Soon the four renegades come out, heavy-loaded. Pud Huckabey, or mebbly it's Fud, says, "Got it all, boss. Where'll we take it?"

"Drop it here," says Bridgely, cool as a cucumber. "There's a job to do before the getaway. Lintback, Plentybear an' Tensleep have turned against us. They're across the street right now, laying for us as we come out. Blast 'em down an' then come back."

"What about the people, boss?"

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DIME WESTERN MAGAZINE

"You're deputies, ain't you? They ain't organized. Go on; take care of it."

"You devil," blats Barlow. "And to think I trusted you."

"Shut up!" Bridgely backhands him across the mouth, staggerin' him.

The twins an' their gun-mates are headin' for the door, their steps echoin'. They're almost to it when Bridgely suddenly lifts his gun an' shakes out four quick shots at 'em. Someone yells, an' strangles. A body hits the floor. The door crashes open an' a Huckabey hollers, "Doublecrossed, by hell!" A gun flashes from the front jamb, but Bridgely is hunkered, hidden by the counter.

It's then the firin' starts outside. Shouts of men. All the previous frustration of Carley Shell an' his possemen comes out in that hell-for-triggered volley. I see vast surprise hit Bridgely's face. He stands up. Barlow gives a bawl of terror an' leaps away. The actin' sheriff ketches him in three bounds, whirls him around an' jams his gun against the banker's chest.

"Now, you rat," rasps Bridgely. "You tried to influence Betty against me, arguing I didn't have enough money. Well, I've got enough. All right, Lint, get these sacks on that horse!"

"Coming—" I gruff—"to square for Burt Herrick. Make your fight, Bridgely!"

He drops the banker, whirls, catches my outlines in the faint glow of the candle. "You!" he breathes, an' swings his gun. I shoot him down like I would a mangy coyote, then turn an' make it to the window in six long bounds.

"You hear it, Hobbs?"

"Damn' right, son. A big day for Brazos when you showed again. But here comes Shell an' his boys. Get goin'. An' come see me when you're around here again."

We touch palms an' I'm sprintin' down the alley. A minute later, I'm in the stable, throwin' a saddle on Glory, with nobody in the hay mow to dare me. I ride out, lopin'. Racin' down the alley, I pass within a few rods of the lunch counter, lit up now as the undertaker an' a helper load Plentybear's body. I ketch a glimpse of the gal proprietor an' realize that I don't even know her name. She looks lonely an' sweet, an' I can still feel her lips against mine, the scalding pull of her tears.

I'm thinkin' crazy thoughts as I pass into the blackness. Mebbe sometime, when things quiet down an'—Aw, hell, what's the use? Better she don't have her heart busted by a hawss—er—a hawss-trader by the name o' Maxon. Git along, Glory. Mebbe there's still run in that Moffat County posse. *Hi-ka!*



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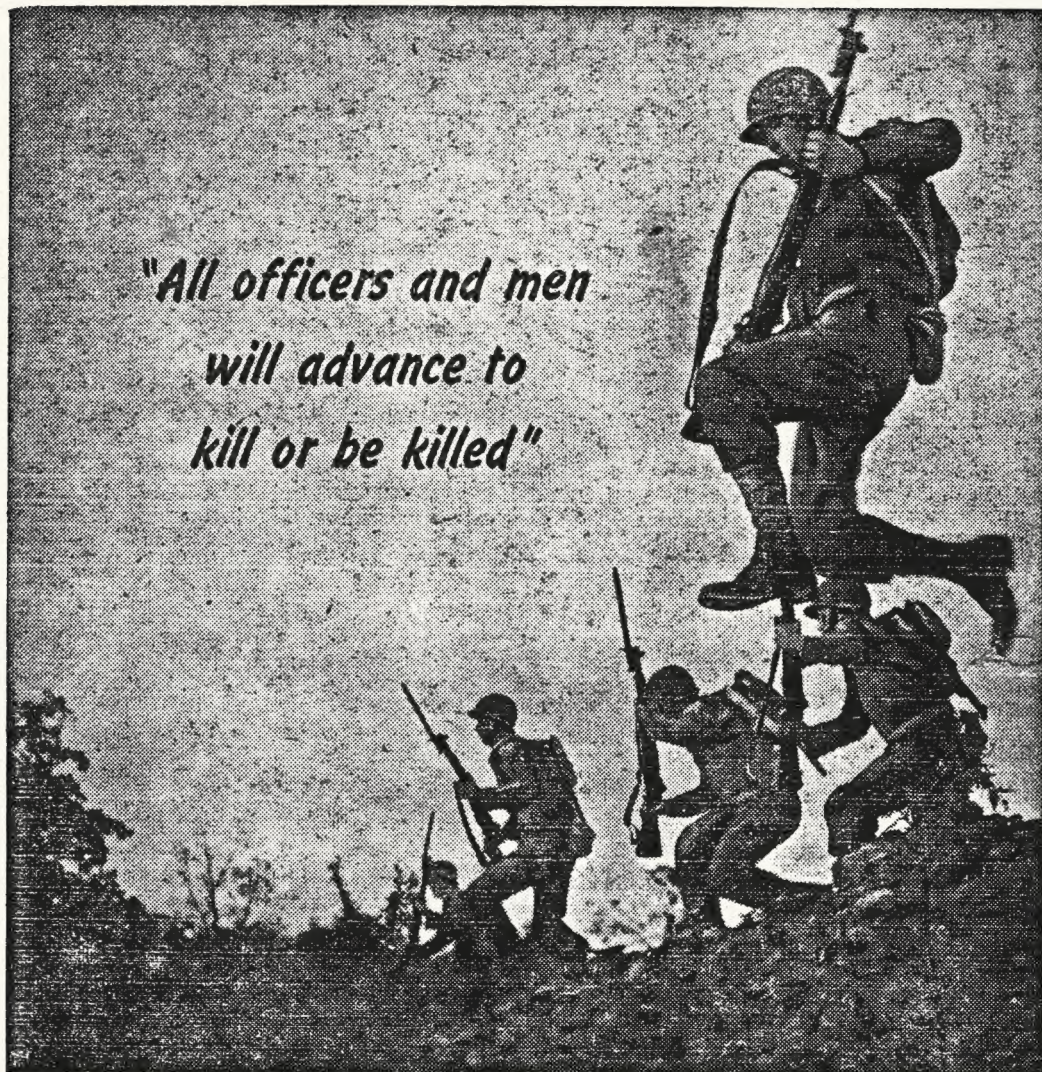
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